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**RE-ENVISIONING REFORM:
FILM, NEW MEDIA, AND POLITICS IN POST-KHOMEINI IRAN**

Committee:

M.R. Ghanoonparvar, Supervisor

Kamran Aghaie

Kristen Brustad

Mia Carter

Michael C. Hillmann

Nasrin Rahimieh

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by

Blake Robert Atwood, B.A., M.A.

Dissertation

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This dissertation opens a multimedia archive of contemporary Iranian films, documentaries, newspaper articles, and political philosophies in order to rethink the complicated relationship between cinema and the Reformist Movement in Iran. The existing scholarship has largely reduced interactions between these institutions to modes of mutual support, noting Mohammad Khatami's backing of the film industry during his tenure as Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance (1982-1992) and his liberal cultural policies as president (1997-2005). However, the research presented in this dissertation indicates that Iranian cinema and the Reformist Movement crucially informed one another, and the dynamics of their exchange functioned on an ideological level. More than just benefiting from the Reformist Movement, certain films and filmmakers helped to shape and articulate its emerging political discourse.

At the same time, the dialogue between Khatami's Reformist Movement and Iranian cinema have generated a unique set of aesthetic qualities that includes a revival of mystic love, the use of Tehran as a metaphoric site of social and structural reformation, and reconfigurations of perceptions of time. I examine films that were released during Khatami's tenure as Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance, his presidential campaign and presidency in order to interrogate the relationship between film and reform and to theorize the visual language that has emerged to enunciate this relationship. I also consider a film and a music video released two years after Khatami's presidency ended. They did not benefit directly from his cultural liberalism but nevertheless participate in central reformist debates. Their experimentation with form suggests that the reformist aesthetic possesses a momentum that permits it to develop and transform without explicit contact with the political movement that inspired it.

I argue, therefore, that the Reformist Movement marked a change on the political landscape at the same time that it signaled a new trend in the country's cinematic history. I connect innovations in film to current trends in new media and youth culture and propose a new reformist model for the study of cultural productivity in contemporary Iran, one that moves past the reductive category of "post-Revolution."

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

For the transliteration of Persian words, I have followed the *Iranian Studies* transliteration scheme. Diacritical marks have been excluded in proper nouns. For the names of well-known politicians and filmmakers, I have used the spelling that has become standardized in print (e.g. Khomeini, Ahmadinejad, and Khamenei).

Consonants

z	ض	b	ب
t	ط	p	پ
z	ظ	t	ت
‘	ع	s	ث
gh	غ	j	ج
f	ف	ch	چ
q	ق	h	ح
k	ک	kh	خ
g	گ	d	د
l	ل	z	ذ
m	م	r	ر
n	ن	z	ز
h	ه	zh	ژ
v	و	s	س
y	ی	sh	ش
‘	ء	s	ص

Vowels

short	long	diphthongs
a (as in <i>ashk</i>)	ā (as in <i>āb</i>)	-
e (as in <i>fekr</i>)	i (as in <i>melli</i>)	ey (as in Teymur)
o (as in <i>pol</i>)	u (as in Tus)	ow (as in <i>rowshan</i>)

Chapter One

The Aesthetics of Reform

The story of Mojtaba Mirtahmasb and Jafar Panahi's submission to the 2011 Cannes Film Festival, a 75-minute piece called *In film nist* [This is not a film] (2011), has all of the makings of a Hollywood action movie. The video arrived in France on a USB stick hidden in a cake that was sent from Iran to Paris. *This Is Not a Film* was shot by Mirtahmasb, who had previously served as Panahi's cameraman, using primarily an iPhone, and it purportedly examines a day in the life of Iranian director Jafar Panahi in his home as he anxiously awaits the verdict to a court appeal and the fate of his personal and professional lives. In December 2010 Panahi, along with fellow director Mohammad Rasoulof, was convicted by a Tehran Revolutionary Court of conspiring to commit crimes against national security and of spreading propaganda against the Islamic Republic. He was sentenced to six years in prison and issued a twenty-year ban on making films, leaving the country, and talking to foreign media. However, many people speculate that Panahi's real crime was supporting the efforts of the Green Movement, a grass-roots initiative that questioned the legitimacy of the 2009 electoral results that guaranteed Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's second term as president.

While many film critics have focused on *This Is Not a Film*'s political urgency and its unorthodox submission to Cannes, the video also offers a complicated exploration

into what it means to make a film in Iran and how politics have refashioned filmmaking in the country. The title *This Is Not a Film* immediately interrogates film as an epistemological category. What is a film if not Mirtahmasb and Panahi's provocative and philosophical submission to Cannes? On a purely technical level, *This Is Not a Film* is not a film; the digital video arrived at the festival on a USB stick rather than in a canister. However, Mirtahmasb and Panahi also examine a broader and more abstract conception of film and call into question who has the authority to make a film (rather than a movie or a video) and who is responsible for issuing that authority? These questions are urgent for Panahi, who faces a twenty-year ban on filmmaking, and with the title *This Is Not a Film* he self-reflexively pokes fun at his sentence at the same time that he contemplates its meaning and its implications.

Storytelling is a central concern for Panahi, and a large portion of *This Is Not a Film* is devoted to a script that was recently rejected by the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance. The story tells of a young woman who has been accepted to study art at a university, but her parents, who disapprove of her plans, lock her in the house instead. Of course, the similarities to Panahi's own house arrest are not meant to go unnoticed. In *This Is Not a Film*, the director reads from the script and constructs the interior space of the young woman's home/jail using masking tape on his carpet. However, he abruptly stops in the middle of constructing the imaginary floor plan and asks the camera, "If we could tell a film, why make a film? Or, indeed, why write about one?" Perhaps it is the lack of narration or plot that allows Panahi to determine that his project is not a film.

Despite any categorical differences, *This Is Not a Film* fits surprisingly well into the body of Panahi's work. His three previous films, *Dāyereh* [Circle] (2000), *Talā-ye sorkh* [Crimson Gold] (2003), and *Āfsāyd* [Offside] (2006), all examine individuals who push the legal limits in Iran and often suffer the consequences. However, rather than condemning these criminals, Panahi's camera sympathetically positions them as victims to social disparities and an unfair legal system. In *This Is Not a Film*, Panahi himself is the criminal who is being sympathetically represented on screen. *This Is Not a Film* ultimately inverts many of the normative features of film, and creates a space in which the director becomes a character; the cameraman becomes the director; scripts are read rather than performed; cameras are phones; three-dimensional spaces (like houses) are reduced to two-dimensional masking tape lines; and a film is not even a film.

Panahi's emphasis on form and structure cannot be fully considered outside of a discussion of the political situation surrounding his project, and *This Is Not a Film* ultimately demonstrates how the cry for reform in the Islamic Republic has deeply impacted filmmaking and refashioned many of its conventions. This dissertation seeks to understand the coeval, twenty-year development of political reform and cinematic reform in post-Revolution Iran. More specifically, this project opens a multimedia archive of Iranian narrative films, documentaries, newspaper articles, and political philosophies in order to rethink the complicated relationship between cinema and the Reformist Movement in the Islamic Republic. While the notion of reform signifies a number of distinct and indistinct political and philosophical factions in contemporary Iran, I focus

my study of the relationship between reform and cinema on the figure of Mohammad Khatami, who was the face of reform in Iran and president of the country between 1997 and 2005. Khatami's reformist movement is often referred to as *jonbesh-e dovom-e khordād* or the May 23rd Movement, a name that memorializes the day that he was unexpectedly elected as president. Although his election was a surprise for many people, it marked the culmination of nearly a decade of nationwide discontent and on-going debate about what the Islamic Republic could be outside of a revolutionary framework.

During the Islamic Republic's first decade, Khatami served as the Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance (1982-1992), and his interest in and special relationship with cinema date back to that period, as do the origins of his reformism. My research indicates that certain films within Iranian cinema helped to shape and articulate his emerging Reformist Movement both during and after these formative years. Khatami's administrative involvement with and continued support of cinema during his presidency (1997-2005) made him a point of interest for a select group of filmmakers who undertook reform as an ideological project and incorporated Khatami and his philosophies into their films. As a result, a dialogue emerged between Khatami and filmmakers, and their exchanges profoundly affected the shape and direction of political reform and the course of filmmaking in Iran.

In this study, I examine a select number of films from both periods, Khatami's tenure as Minister and his presidency, and also consider visual media after Khatami's presidency in order to theorize a reformist aesthetic that emerged as a result of the

interactions between reform and cinema. Limiting my analysis to cases in which the relationship between Khatami and a particular film or filmmaker is explicit, I determine that within cinema a set of artistic concerns—a new reformative grammar—developed in order to articulate the conversation between these two institutions. The unique set of aesthetic qualities that emerged alongside the Reformist Movement includes a revival of mysticism, the use of Tehran as a metaphoric site of social and structural reformation, reconfigurations of perceptions of time, and the democratization of filmmaking through the use of digital video. The Reformist Movement, therefore, marked a change on the political landscape at the same time that it signaled a new trend in the country’s cinematic history.

Post-Revolution/Post-Third Cinema

My argument participates in and productively complicates a number of debates related to both Iranian historiography and theories of Third Cinema. Iranian studies in general and film studies in particular view the post-Revolution period categorically. In doing so, they suggest that the Revolution of 1978-79 fundamentally altered Iranian culture and marked the beginning of a new temporal category bound together by a single set of identifiable features and institutions. Hamid Naficy suggests that the Revolution created a new cinema “with its own special industrial and financial structure and unique

ideological, thematic and production values.”¹ Negar Mottahedeh similarly gathers three decades of Iranian cinema under the term “post-revolutionary” and locates “displaced allegories” regarding the “veiled [female] figure” as a constitutive feature of the filmic grammar and syntax of Iranian cinema since the Revolution.² Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad also views the films produced in the Islamic Republic as representative of a single period in Iran’s cinematic history. He argues that a complex series of cultural negotiations on the part of directors, filmgoers, and government officials and mediated by the process of censorship unify the act of enunciation in post-Revolution cinema.³ There is value in determining how radical shifts in political power (like a revolution) restructure cultural production, but equally present is the risk of describing too broadly a historical period. By assigning thirty years’ worth of films to the single category “post-Revolution(ary) cinema,” scholars locate this body of work temporally and at the same time keep it tied to a single event, the Revolution. However, Iranian cinema after the Revolution is a multifaceted body that comprises a number of distinct periods and trends. By reading the history of Iranian cinema within the Islamic Republic through the lens of reform, it is possible to identify and begin describing one such trend.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s death in June 1989 marks an important transition as we consider the different phases that constitute Iranian cinema over the last thirty

¹ Hamid Naficy, “Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update,” *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris 2002), 29.

² Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 13.

³ Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic* (London: Routledge, 2010), 161.

years. As the spiritual and revolutionary leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini was charged with laying the broad strokes of political and cultural policy after the Revolution. Specifically, in his role as the Islamic Republic's first Supreme Leader, he was responsible for defining and clarifying the country's new ideals, including within the cultural sphere. In his first speech after returning to Iran from exile in Paris, Khomeini declared, "Cinema is a modern invention that ought to be used for the sake of educating the people...It is the misuse of cinema that we are opposed to, a misuse caused by the treacherous policies of our rulers."⁴ Khomeini's mention of cinema in this momentous speech demonstrates its importance to the revolutionary cause. More than that, it shows that Khomeini had a particular understanding of the role of cinema in the new Islamic Republic, how it should function and to what end. However, a great deal of uncertainty ensued after Khomeini's death in 1989 and the country's leaders faced the challenge of reconciling a set of paradoxical policies that he had enacted during his ten-year rule, and in his absence administrators were left to their own instincts and powers of interpretation. The Reformist Movement was one such set of interpretations, with which cinema was most closely aligned. Iranian cinema after Khomeini's death, therefore, deserves critical examination within a framework of reform.

The interactions between Iranian cinema and the Reformist Movement represent a complex and bilateral system of exchange that scholarship has previously simplified as a relationship of convenience. During Khatami's first year as the Minister of Islamic

⁴ Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution: Writing and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 258.

Culture and Guidance, the Ministry was charged with the regulation of the film industry. As a result, from the outset, Khatami and filmmakers had a contentious relationship. On the one hand, the Islamic Republic recognized in its earliest years the transformative value of film and opted to support the indigenous film industry with subsidies, so it could compete with foreign imports. The government continues to provide financial backing for one-third of the country's film production and offers great incentives to the industry as a whole by providing tax breaks and reduced-interest loans.⁵ Scholarship in film studies generally refers to post-Revolution Iranian cinema as "a national cinema."⁶ The financial arrangement between the government and the film industry permitted in part the development of the country's national cinema, and Khatami was in charge of the governing agency during post-revolutionary cinema's formative years. Filmmakers were hopeful when Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani appointed Khatami to the Ministry and they dubbed his first year in office as "the year that love entered cinema."⁷ However, conservative policymakers anticipated his cultural liberalism and blocked his attempts to endorse serious cinematic reform.⁸ The government exerts great control over the film industry through censorship and the Ministry under Khatami enacted a five-tier

⁵ Ghazian, Hossein. "The Crisis in the Iranian Film Industry and the Role of the Government," *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris 2002), 77-84.

⁶ Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 14.

⁷ Nima Hassaninasab "Zhānr-e dovom-e Khordād" [The Genre of the Second of Khordad], *Film* 19, no. 270 (2001), 10.

⁸ Hassaninasab, "Zhānr-e dovom-e Khordād," 10.

copyright system that regulates every step of the filmmaking process, from screenplays to distribution.⁹

Towards the end of his time as minister, Khatami became notably frustrated with the regulation of cultural productivity that had been built into the Republic's legal system. During this time, he relaxed considerably censorship practices,¹⁰ and his last two years as Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance are well documented as the "golden age" for artistic and literary production in post-Revolution Iran. Khatami ultimately resigned from the Ministry in 1992, citing a "violation" of "all legal, religious, ethical, and secular norms" in the "field of culture."¹¹ As a result, he became a champion for artistic rights, and his open support of several controversial works during his last years earned him the respect of notable artists, like director Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Subsequently, during his 1997 presidential campaign "filmmakers, who had good memories from his time in the Ministry" constituted his "most ardent and active supporters."¹² Babak Dad, for example, suggests in his memoir that Khatami's electoral success was enabled in part by Makhmalbaf's very public espousal of him.¹³

Khatami maintained his support of cinema during his first term as president and *Film Magazine* notes that, "Everyone who has followed the cinematic products for the

⁹ Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran," 39.

¹⁰ Sussan Siavoshi, "Cultural Policies and the Islamic Republic: Cinema and Book Production," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 4 (1997), 517.

¹¹ "Matn-e estef'ānāmeḥ hejat al-eslām va al-moslāmin doktor Khātami montashar shod"

¹² Ahmad Reza Jalili, "Sinemāgarān dar entekhābāt: ruzegār-e mā..." [Filmmakers in the Elections: *Our Times...*], *Film* 20, no. 283 (2002), 18.

¹³ Babak Dad, *Sad ruz bā Khātami: matn-e kāmel* [A Hundred Days with Khatami: the Complete Text] (Tehran: Ministry of Culture and Guidance, 1998), 54-55.

past two decades has come to the consensus that...the successful and important works of the past four years were enabled by the present government.”¹⁴ In this way, the existing scholarship categorizes the relationship between the Reformist Movement and Iranian cinema in permissive terms. However, in this study I show that the depths of the interactions between cinema and reform extend well beyond mutual support. These two institutions effectively informed and influenced one another, and the dynamics of their exchange functioned on an ideological level.

This ideological exchange depended in part on cinema’s engagement with the Reformist Movement’s rhetoric, as films participated in the definition of new terms that Khatami introduced into Iranian discourse. Khatami’s election marked a change in political power at the same time that it represented a semantic shift. During Khatami’s campaign and later presidency, terms like democracy, civil society, human rights, and citizenship replaced the country’s revolutionary rhetoric that included imperialism, *jihad*, *gharbzadegi* (westoxification), revolution, and martyrdom.¹⁵ By probing cinema’s involvement in these popular and political discourses, it is possible to open up a discussion of Iranian cinema’s relationship to Third Cinema.

The notion of Third Cinema emerged in the 1960s and 1970s alongside national liberation movements, primarily in Latin America. A theory of Third Cinema was first articulated by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, who, in their treatise “Towards a

¹⁴ Nima Hassaninasab, “Zhānr-e dovom-e Khordād,” 10.

¹⁵ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 186.

Theory of Third Cinema,” constructed an argument about cinema based on Frantz Fanon’s premise that in the Third World cultural artifacts are necessarily at the service of liberation. While First Cinema represents the hegemonic Hollywood films that promote bourgeois values and Second Cinema comprises European *auteur* films that resist Hollywood models but privilege the individual experience of the director, Third Cinema is a cinema of collective Third World anti-imperial struggle. Teshome Gabriel later expanded the notion of Third Cinema to focus less on “where it is made” and more on how it opposes “imperialism and class oppression in all their ramifications and manifestations.”¹⁶

Anthony Guneratne suggests that scholars have favored classical film theory over Third Cinema theory to examine post-Revolution Iranian cinema, despite the fact that Third Cinema as a theory and a practice “undergird” the tradition.¹⁷ The films produced during the first phase of Iran’s post-Revolution cinematic history conform to this notion of Third Cinema. These films, created during Khomeini’s lifetime and the Iran-Iraq War, were, by and large, anti-imperialist in nature and devoted to the solidification of revolutionary ideals. However, after Khomeini’s death, many films sought more to engage in the idea of reform, which, in its call for change within the existing sociopolitical structures, differs significantly from the notion of revolution. This crucial shift in cinematic alignment begs the question: how do theories of Third Cinema evolve

¹⁶ Teshome H. Gabriel, “Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation” (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982), 2.

¹⁷ Anthony Guneratne, “Introduction,” *Rethinking Third Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 6.

or transform as revolutionary rhetoric tempers and reform emerges as the dominant discourse?

Scholars, recognizing the fact that Third Cinema is so wrapped up in the moment of liberation that it cannot be sustained indefinitely, have theorized a number of models to describe Third World and other minority cinemas post-Third Cinema. In his study of “accented cinema,” Hamid Naficy looks at how experiences of exile and diaspora impact films by filmmakers working outside of their country of birth.¹⁸ Robert Stam on the other hand considers hybridity as a dominant feature of the aesthetics of world cinema.¹⁹ Both of these approaches depend on a transnational understanding of the world’s cinematic system. As a result, they do not accommodate the Iranian case, which is, at least at the moment of enunciation, a national endeavor more than a transnational, especially since the phase I am describing is tied to a national political movement. The present study represents an effort to generate a post-Third Cinema/post-Revolution theory that moves beyond transnationalism while still acknowledging Third Cinema’s roots in Iran’s post-Revolution cinema.

Theories of Third Cinema also open up discussions of categorization and allow for the conceptualization of diversity within a single national cinema. In his introduction to *Rethinking Third Cinema*, Anthony R. Guneratne draws attention to several national cinemas in which combinations of First, Second, and Third Cinema exist side by side. He

¹⁸ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁹ Robert Stam, “Beyond Third Cinema: the Aesthetics of Hybridity” in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, ed. Anthony R. Guneratne (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 32-47.

points to the case of Egypt, which serves as a base for popular cinema in the Arab world but at the same time features a renowned *auteur* cinema lead by filmmakers like Yousef Chahine. Guneratne also examines India cinema, in which New Indian Cinema, a Third Cinema movement, is constantly reacting to and in dialogue with the country's thriving First Cinema, whose so-called Bollywood films often borrow plotlines and actors from the New Indian Cinema tradition.²⁰

In his early analysis of Iranian cinema in the Islamic Republic, Hamid Naficy detects a similar diversity in the country's developing industry. He notes the development of a "populist cinema," which "inscribes postrevolutionary values," alongside the rise of what he calls a "quality cinema" that "engages with those values" and critiques "social conditions under the Islamic government."²¹ Naficy later revises these terms to include a "populist" and an "art" cinema.²² Although his terminology is at times problematic, Naficy's identification of two competing cinemas in Iran that correspond with First and Third Cinemas is useful. While every effort has been made in this dissertation to avoid language that too readily generalizes Iranian cinema or reduces it to a homogenous body of films, it is important to note that the present study examines films that belong to and grew out of the latter trend and it does not attempt to account for the country's popular

²⁰ Anthony Guneratne, "Introduction," 22-23.

²¹ Hamid Naficy, "Iranian Cinema under the Islamic Republic," *American Anthropologist* 97, no. 3 (September 1995), 549.

²² Hamid Naficy, "Cinematic Exchange Relations: Iran and the West," *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics*, eds. Nikki R. Keddie and Rudi Matthee (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2002), 261.

cinema.²³ I limit my analysis in this way, because I am principally concerned with manifestations of *reform* in Iranian cinema. Since notions of reform in the Islamic Republic necessarily interrogate and critique “postrevolutionary values,” the country’s “quality cinema” has emerged as the cinematic trend best suited to house the relationship between film and the Reformist Movement.

Seyyed-e Khandān or the Smiling Seyyed

Mohammad Khatami functions as a central character in this dissertation, and his political career serves as its organizing principal. This study is arranged according to the main phases of Khatami’s political life, and these stages are in turn read against similarly important and contemporaneous events in Iran’s cinematic history. Information about Khatami’s political career informs my analysis in the following chapters, and although many of the tenets of his platform are examined in more depth later in this dissertation, a broad outline of Khatami’s life and his major intellectual and political contributions proves crucial to conceptualizing this project as a whole. Seyyed Mohammad Khatami was born on September 29, 1943 in Ardakan, the capital city of the central province of Yazd, and grew up in a religious family, and his father was an ayatollah. His early life

²³ Kamran Rastegar has asked the very important question, “if both sectors [Iran’s popular and art-house cinema] are covered by the same censorship codes, why have they adopted such different aesthetic responses?” For more, see, Kamran Rastegar, “Book Review: *Displaced Allegories*” *Feminist Review*, 97, no. 1 (2011), 14-16. His question suggests the urgency of a study of the country’s popular cinema, especially now that a considerable amount of scholarship attempts to account for the aesthetic development of Iran’s art-house cinema under the codes of censorship implemented by the Islamic Republic. Unfortunately, the present study is unable to address Rastegar’s question because reform as a philosophical and political project in the Islamic Republic is so tied to the art-house trend.

and education set the foundation for the reformist political philosophies that would later define his presidency. Following the completion of his secondary education and preliminary seminary study in Qom, Khatami entered the University of Esfahan and pursued a degree in western philosophy. He then enrolled at the University of Tehran and completed a master's degree in education.

After fulfilling his mandatory military service, Khatami returned to Qom in 1968 and resumed his seminary studies, which he pursued for seven years to the highest level. He was then appointed as the head of the Islamic Center in Hamburg, Germany, one of the oldest and most important Shi'i centers in Europe. Khatami held this position until the outbreak of the Revolution of 1978-79 and Ayatollah Khomeini's monumental return from exile. Khatami returned to Iran after the fall of the Shah in order to participate in the rebuilding of the country and the making of an Islamic republic. Khatami's life before the Revolution is telling of the new brand of Iranian intellectualism that he would come to represent by the late 1990s. Even in his early life, he attempted to marry western philosophies with traditional Shi'i thought and he actively engaged in intercultural dialogue.

Upon returning to Iran, Khatami immediately assumed leadership roles in the new Islamic Republic, and during the Republic's first two decades he served in a wide range of positions within the government. He was a member of the *Majles* (1980-1982), the Chief of Keyhān Publishing, head of Islamic Propagation during the Iran-Iraq War, and the head of the National Library (1992-1997). However, his most important post before

becoming president was head of the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance [*vazārat-e farhang va ershād-e Eslāmi*], which he held 1982-1986 and again 1989-1991. Under Khatami's leadership, the Ministry took shape, defined its purpose, and established the mechanisms necessary to oversee and regulate cultural productivity according to the Islamic Republic's new vision. During his second period as Minister, Khatami experimented with the cultural liberalness that he would later more formally introduce through his presidency.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, his efforts were unorthodox; the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) solidified devotion to the Islamic Republic and concepts of reform had not yet been introduced into popular discourse.²⁴ As a result, the conservative *Majles* at the time forced his resignation in 1992, and he assumed a much less visible role as the head of the National Library, which he held until his election in 1997. Khatami's political career within the Islamic Republic serves as a reminder that the reformism that he would implement as president was a top-down initiative. Khatami was not a populist candidate in 1997; he is a member of the religious class and, like his predecessors, was elected from within the country's existing leadership. Nevertheless, when he registered his candidacy in 1997, Khatami was relatively unknown outside of intellectual and bureaucratic circles, which made his landslide victory over Nateq-Nuri, a better known candidate from the religious establishment, even more unexpected.

²⁴ For more on Khatami's efforts during his terms as Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance, see Sussan Siavoshi, "Cultural Policies and the Islamic Republic: Cinema and Book Production," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 4 (1997), 509-530.

During his campaign, Khatami appealed to the country's young generation, who represented a majority of the country's population and who did not participate in the Revolution because they were too young or not yet born. By calling for reform, Khatami recognized the need for improvement but at the same time maintained his commitment to the Islamic Republic and promised to improve the lives of Iranians through the existing political framework. As Mehran Kamrava has noted, Khatami's platform was representative of a broader trend in intellectualism at the time, and a number of religious intellectuals, including 'Ali Reza 'Alavitabar, 'Emadeddin Baqi, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Ahmad Qabel, were also attempting to reconcile Islam and democracy.²⁵ However, Khatami gave voice to this movement in popular discourse, and his election marked Iranian society's readiness for reform. As Ebrahim Yazdi notes, Khatami's election in 1997 was, in some ways, an act of protest on the part of Iranian society, an indicator that Iranians were for the most part loyal to the political system but "intolerant" of the condition of the country.²⁶

The thrust of Khatami's political platform attended to the marriage of Islam and democracy within the Islamic Republic,²⁷ and the term "*jāme'eh-ye madani*" or "civil society" emerged in his campaign speeches as the means best suited to bring together these two entities. However, Khatami's appropriation of civil society, a term that had

²⁵ Mehran Kamrava, "The Reformist Religious Discourse," *Iran's Intellectual Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 120-172.

²⁶ Ebrahim Yazdi, *Seh Jomhuri* [Three Republics] (Tehrān: Jāme'eh-ye Irāniān, 1379/2000), 52-53, quoted in Kamrava, *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*, 130.

²⁷ Mohammad Khatami, *Mardomsālāri* [Democracy] (Tehrān: Tahr-e no, 1380/2001), 29.

emerged in intellectual circles in Iran several years earlier, was more than just a political move. Both during and after his campaign, Khatami sought to define and expand this terminology, and as a result his campaign efforts were “philosophical and discourse-oriented” as much as they were “political.”²⁸ In Khatami’s conception, civil society is an inherent part of Islam, and a model for civil society was established by the Prophet Mohammad in Medina. He argued that the human rights that any civil society protects are fundamentally part of the religion.²⁹ Through the concept of an “Islamic civil society,” Khatami promised a more transparent political system that thrived on the participation and extended equal legal rights to all of the country’s citizens, not just its Muslim population.³⁰ As such, the kind of civil society that he proposed for Iran depended on “hokumat-e qānun” [rule of law], which recast the Revolutionary slogan “hokumat-e eslāmi” [Islamic rule].³¹ Khatami’s use of “civil society” opened up a series of related discussions that ultimately formed his vision for the Islamic Republic, which included respect for human rights, political participation, religious pluralism, democracy, and open dialogue. This vision appealed to Iranian society and gave it hope.

However, Khatami’s first term as president tested the limits of that hope. On the one hand, he made some strides in his attempt to implement his vision for Iran, including the arrest of government officials involved in a chain of murders involving Iranian

²⁸ Kamrava, *Iran’s Intellectual Revolution*, 28.

²⁹ Mohammad Khatami, *Eslām, ruhāniyyat va enqelāb-e Eslāmi* [Islam, the Clergy, and the Islamic Revolution] (Tehrān: Tahr-e no, 1379/2000), 25.

³⁰ Khatami, *Eslām ruhāniyyat va enqelāb-e Eslāmi*, 25.

³¹ Saïd Amir Arjomand, “The Rise and Fall of Khatami and the Reformist Movement in Iran,” *Constellations* 12 no.4 (Winter 2004), 507.

intellectuals. The liberalization of the press is especially well documented in this period.³²

In 1998, he also used his position as the country's leader to introduce "*goftogu-ye tamaddon-hā*" or "dialogue among civilizations" to the United Nations General Assembly, which would later declare 2001 the Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations. This effort spoke to Khatami's promise to increase accountability in the country, and it represents his best-known achievement outside of the country. Unfortunately, Khatami's efforts to improve the country's local economic and social conditions were largely unsuccessful, and in many instances conservative members of the *Majles* blocked his attempts to liberalize the country's political and social systems.³³

Khatami's commitment to his own vision for the Islamic Republic was called into question in the summer of 1999, when the closure of the reformist newspaper *Salām* resulted in student riots across Tehran. Revolutionary Guards and police forces attacked the protestors, resulting in several deaths and many more injuries. Khatami, rather than intervening, issued a statement warning protestors that their actions threatened the foundation of the Republic, and he urged them to return home. These riots, also known as *fāje'eh-ye kuye dāneshgāh* or the University Dormitories Tragedy, marked a widening rift between Khatami and the country's young citizens, who had been his primary supporters

³² For more, see Abdollah Gholāmrezā Kāshi, *Matbu'āt dar 'asr-e Khātami* [Publication in the Khatami Period] (Tehrān: Salak, 1379/2000).

³³ Sa'īd Amir Arjomand, for example, notes that in 2000 the Guardian Council annulled the election of several reformist candidates into the *Majles*, and he contends that the Guardian Council played a role in the assassination of Sa'id Hajjarian, the "architect" of the reformist victories during those elections. See Arjomand, "The Rise and Fall of Khatami and the Reformist Movement in Iran," 509-510. For more on the challenges to reform during Khatami's presidency, see Ghancheh Tazmini, *Khatami's Iran: The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 98-129.

just two years earlier. Indeed, during these protests the slogan “Khamenei must go” was used for the first time,³⁴ and this demand challenged *velāyat-e faqih* [Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists], a concept that Khatami continued to support. As Ghancheh Tazmini notes, “every time a newspaper was shut down, or a political rally or meeting disrupted...Khatami’s inability to condemn or counter the act...was progressively exposed.”³⁵ His strategic paralysis created an apathetic atmosphere during the 2001 presidential elections, and although he was re-elected with a majority of votes, thirty-three percent of the electorate did not participate, significantly less than the previous election when over eighty percent of the country’s eligible population participated in the electoral process.³⁶ Khatami’s second term as president was marked by the same political gridlock between conservative and reformist leaders, and the power struggle between Khatami and the Supreme Leader Khamenei gave rise to serious questions about whether or not reform could take place in the existing political structure.

Although Khatami was unable during his presidency to implement his vision of an Islamic civil society by changing the Islamic Republic’s policies and laws, one should not undervalue his intellectual and philosophical contributions to Iranian society. Indeed, the present study is an attempt in some ways to recuperate Khatami as a figure of reform and to demonstrate how his ideas profoundly impacted one segment of Iranian society, namely cinema. Filmmakers took seriously Khatami’s call for political transparency,

³⁴ Arjomand, “The Rise and Fall of Khatami and the Reformist Movement in Iran,” 509.

³⁵ Tazmini, *Khatami’s Iran*, 112.

³⁶ Tazmini, *Khatami’s Iran*, 113.

pluralism, intercultural exchange, and respect for human rights and incorporated many of these tenets in their films. As a result, they established a crucial dialogue with Khatami and kept elements of his Reformist Movement visible and in circulation, globally and locally.

Visuality in the Islamic Republic

This dissertation theorizes the aesthetics of reform in Iran since 1988, and it is worth considering why cinema, rather than other art forms like literature or music, emerged as the medium best suited to enunciate the relationship between politics and art in the Islamic Republic. An important cultural shift has taken place in Iranian society as a result of three important events that occurred almost simultaneously: the Revolution of 1978-1979, the rise of the Islamic Republic, and the start of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The coalescence of these three events impacted many aspects of Iranian society, and in the cultural sphere there emerged a new visuality that has refashioned the way in which various social and political institutions interact and communicate with invested parties. As I demonstrate in this section, the language of the Islamic Republic is largely visual. Because reform generally attempts to enact change through existing structures, it is appropriate that the reformist aesthetic has developed and continues to function within the same visual field that the Islamic Republic created.

In a rather pointed statement, Peter Chelkowski describes the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79 as a “picture-perfect revolution.”³⁷ He and Hamid Dabashi later theorized this notion further, arguing that the Islamic Revolution “was primarily a pictorial revolution.”³⁸ They describe revolutionary Iran as “The Museum of Furious Art...a nation engaged in a revolution and a war, relentlessly remaking itself in images and forms, shapes, colors, frames of angers and anxieties.”³⁹ One of the successes of Khomeini’s revolution was its ability to mobilize and *visualize* core Shi’i symbols, and with the use of visual media the Revolution and the Islamic Republic reinforced its Islamic revolutionary discourse.⁴⁰ Murals and photographs of martyrs of the Iran-Iraq War, billboards of clerics, and state-commissioned graffiti that graphically depicted the US as an evil imperial force covered the cities’ surfaces. Soldiers carried photographs of Khomeini with them to the front line, and Khomeini gave his own *image* as the literal face of the revolutionary cause. Similarly, women were required to veil themselves in public and many men grew beards to show their support for the Revolution. These visual transformations to citizens’ bodies also profoundly affected the way that country *looked* and was experienced on a visual level.⁴¹

³⁷ Peter Chelkowski, “In Ritual and Revolution: The Image in the Transformation of Iranian Culture” *Views: The Journal of Photography of New England* 10 (Spring 1989), 8.

³⁸ Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 9.

³⁹ Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 10.

⁴⁰ Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 9.

⁴¹ Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 106-130.

The nature of this visual campaign marked a radical departure from pre-Revolution practices. In the fifty years before the Revolution, the Pahlavi regime, under the auspices of the Society for National Heritage, attempted to define a national aesthetic. In particular, it attempted to appropriate a modernist and Westernized aesthetic in the hope that this kind of visual language would reflect the country's modernization efforts.⁴² However, the Pahlavi government and the Society for National Heritage were unable to marry on a visual field the country's ancient and local histories with imported, Western artistic modes and styles. The Pahlavi government also attempted to capitalize on Shi'i motifs and symbols; however, it was never able to deploy religious symbolism effectively.⁴³ The Revolution immediately achieved what the Pahlavi regime never did: it created a national aesthetic and successfully mobilized religious symbolism for political purposes. Part of the Revolution's success in this regard rested in its decision to bring these two tasks together. The religious symbolism was made visual. In doing so, the Revolution ascribed new significance to an Islamic visuality that would become a regular feature of the Islamic Republic's language.

As Dabashi and Chelkowski note, the Revolution (and later the Islamic Republic) was "in full semiotic control of the representation of itself."⁴⁴ This statement highlights an important feature of the visual culture the Revolution created: it was at the service of

⁴² For a more thorough treatment of the Pahlavi Dynasty's effort to control the national aesthetic, see Talinn Grigor, "Recultivating 'Good Taste': The Early Pahlavi Modernists and their Society for National Heritage" *Iranian Studies* 37 (Spring 2004), 17-45.

⁴³ Kamran Scot Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 110.

⁴⁴ Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 9.

the Islamic Republic and, therefore, part of a propaganda campaign. Initially, then, it was not representative of an important cultural shift; it was not fundamentally different than Khomeini's statements about how art *should* function in the Islamic Republic. However, with the passage of time, the impact of the top-down efforts of the Islamic Republic to create a new visual culture gradually spread and grew. As Roxanne Varzi has noted, "More than twenty years later" in "the republic of images... the physicality of daily exposure, tactility, must have had some effect."⁴⁵ And this effect is the creation of "a people that hear with their eyes!"⁴⁶ If we accept this statement, then clearly there has been a fundamental shift in the way that Iranian society interacts with the physical world. And, indeed, we can find evidence of this phenomenon in more recent events in Iran. The Islamic Republic has and continues to employ graffiti as a means of conveying its messages. Certainly, this process originated in the fact that the Islamic Revolution was initially a resistance movement and the media that it opted to employ generally fell underground. However, the continuation of these images on the wall has created a unique and visual interactive forum for political negotiations.

In his article "Divār beh masābeh-ye resāleh" [Wall as Message], Mahmud Esmā'ilnia indicates that there are two types of graffiti in Iran, one of which is at the service of the government and the other belongs to the common people.⁴⁷ However, the contested electoral results from the summer of 2009 and the various movements that

⁴⁵ Varzi, *Warring Souls*, 130.

⁴⁶ Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 9

⁴⁷ Mahmud Esmā'il-Niā, "Divār beh masābeh-ye resāleh" [Wall as Message], *E'temād-e melli* 3 Khordād 1375/ 24 May 2006.

grew as a result demonstrate the ways in which these two types of graffiti are in conversation. Following the election results, supporters of Mir-Hossein Mousavi decorated city walls with green. While they would do their work at night, during the day members of the *Basij* would revise the Green Movement's graffiti statements. For example, "Mousavi" written on a wall in green would later read "*marg bar Mousavi*" [Death to Mousavi]. The first two words, *marg bar*, would be in black and "Mousavi" in green. Similarly, a statement like "*marg bar Khāmane 'i*" [Death to Khamenei] would be transformed into "*dorud bar Khāmane 'i*" [Peace upon Khamenei].⁴⁸ Negotiations for power between these two forces, then, are charted in black and green visually and strikingly on the walls of the city. This example is significant here because it shows how visual Iranian society has become, and the roots of this visuality can be located in the propaganda campaigns of both the Revolution of 1978-79 and the Iran-Iraq War.

The first eight years of the Islamic Republic solidified its visual culture. The presence of this visuality fundamentally changed the way that Iranian society perceived the physical and abstract world, and it reconfigured the possibilities of resistive space to favor a visual orientation. At the same time that propaganda for the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War constantly occupied the Iranian visual field, the country's literary publishing industry hit its nadir.⁴⁹ However, the Islamic Republic spent this period

⁴⁸ For a more detailed account of these exchanges see "Tehran's Graffiti Wars" in *France 24: International News* [accessed online: <http://observers.france24.com/en/content/20100302-tehran-graffiti-war-green-movement-basij-militia-spray-paint-tags>]

⁴⁹ According to a special issue of *Keyhān-e farhangi*, an important cultural journal, during the Islamic Republic's first five years, there were fewer than twenty literary publications but over seventy films

strengthening its indigenous film industry. The joint effect of these initiatives was a fundamental – though limited – shift in cultural value. The Revolution of 1978-79 and its immediate aftermath created a society in Iran that puts more stock (cultural, social, political, and financial) into film than into literature. This argument by no means suggests that Iranian cultural sphere no longer attaches importance to literature, but rather contends that Iranian society has redistributed artistic value to favor cinema, because it is part of the visual language that has become an integral part of communication in the Islamic Republic. Each of the films examined in this dissertation attempt to cast the sometimes abstract political philosophies of reform visually; they give image to thought and recreate cinematically the debates that were taking place philosophically and politically. As a result, the reformist aesthetic that I describe in this study necessarily participates in Islamic Republic's visuality, as it splashes new colors and shapes onto the country's visual field.

released. For more, see *Kahyān-e farhangi: adabyāt va honar-e enqalāb* 9, no. 93 (Bahman 1371/February 1993), 93-94.

Chapter Two

Mystic Love and the Emerging Poetics of Reform

So far as the present relationship between man and nature is concerned, we live in tragic times. The sense of solitude and monologue, and the anxiety rooted within this situation, embody this tragic world. Our call to dialogue aims at soothing this sense of tragedy. In addition to poetic and artistic experiences, mysticism also provides us with a graceful, profound and universal language for dialogue. Mystical experience, the constitution of the revelation and countenance of the sacred in the heart and soul of the mystic, opens new existential pathways to the human spirit...The proposal for a dialogue among civilizations builds upon the study of cultural geography of various fields of civilization. Yet the unique and irreplaceable role of governments should never be overlooked in the process.

--Mohammad Khatami, UNESCO Roundtable, "Dialogue among Civilizations"

On September 5, 1998, in one of his first international acts as Iranian President, Mohammad Khatami addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York and introduced the concept of *goftogu-ye tamaddon-hā* [dialogue among civilizations] as an alternative to Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations."¹ The U.N. welcomed his invitation to think beyond the limiting dichotomies popular at the time—including Iranian/non-Iranian and Muslim/non-Muslim—and declared the year 2001 a Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. In 2000 during a preliminary U.N. roundtable discussion about the concept, Khatami interestingly offered mysticism as a means of clearing the way for new intercultural paths and discussion. Khatami indicated that international and intercultural dialogue depends on an openness that approximates

¹ The term "clash of civilizations" was first used by scholar Bernard Lewis in "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic Monthly* 266.3 (September 1990). The concept, which is rooted the colonial term "clash of cultures," was picked up and expanded by Huntington, first in the article "Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72.3 (Summer 1993), 22-49 and later in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

the expansion of the mystic's heart. However, he quite unexpectedly punctuated this esoteric call for mysticism with an emphasis on the central role of government.

In his speech, Khatami uses the word '*erfān*' and its derivatives to indicate mysticism, mystical and mystic. This term, which is separate from *tasavvof* [Sufism], describes mystical experiences and emphasizes "esoteric doctrine" and "monist philosophy."² The word can broadly be applied to varying modes of thinking and texts that attempt to unify "the divine and human realms in the common ground of absolute being."³ However, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, '*erfān*' has been used predominately to describe intellectual trends that combine Sufi thought and Twelver Shi'i philosophy. Generally, the intellectual developments that fall into the category of '*erfān*' stress the "mystico-philosophical side of Sufism and Shi'ism, in contra-distinction to the organized practice of Sufism...and to the rational speculation and legalistic reasoning of" Shi'i theology.⁴

'*Erfān*' is derived from the Arabic root '*ʿayn-rā'-fā'*' which relates to knowledge and cogitation. '*Erfān*' is in some ways synonymous with the Arabic-derived word '*elm*', the word for learned knowledge; however, the former is more concerned with human knowledge and access to truth than divine knowledge or truth. The ultimate act of '*erfān*' is knowing God. However, within this system, God may only be known if He reveals Himself, an act that may take the form of scripture, His presence in the heart of the

² Gerhard Bowering, "'Erfān,'" *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Online Edition, available at: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/erfan-1>

³ Bowering, "'Erfān.'"

⁴ Bowering, "'Erfān.'"

believer, or His attributes in the world of creation. Every act of knowing carries the potential of God's self-manifestation, thereby "giving the human knower insight into the true nature of the things that become the object of human knowledge."⁵

Because this chapter is concerned with mysticism as a whole and mystic love as a component of that system, it is important to consider the role of love in mystic thought. Because '*erfān*' draws heavily on the Sufi tradition, it is worth defining mystic love according to Sufism. In his study of Sufism, Arthur John Arberry suggests that *mahabba* [Sufi doctrine of love] is "of great significance" to Sufi thought as a whole.⁶ This doctrine, which organizes the Love/Lover/Beloved trinity, transforms the image of God from a remote Potentate into a merciful God "ever taking the first step towards man, the elect of His creation, to draw him unto him by the powerful cords of love."⁷ Love is one attribute of God's created world, so knowledge and experience of love are gateways to knowledge of God, the ultimate goal of '*erfān*'. For this reason, throughout Persian's literary history (of which cinema is a significant part) images of love have taken on allegorical meaning and often signify God's love.

In his speech on "Dialogue among Civilizations," Khatami collapses the metaphysical on the one hand and the political on the other, and this act begs a question about the origins of the use of mysticism as an intellectual strategy for the enactment of political and social reform in the late twentieth century. This chapter addresses that

⁵ Bowering, "'Erfān."

⁶ Arthur John Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001), 21.

⁷ Arberry 21.

question by tracing a genealogy of political mysticism in the post-Revolution period. In particular, I position Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film *Nowbat-e 'āsheqi* [Time for Love] (1991) as a representative example of cine-mysticism that coincided with other intellectual efforts at the time. I further argue that *Time for Love* functions as one of the most crucial moments in the historical development of a complicated ideological relationship between certain filmmakers, like Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Mohammad Khatami. As Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance at this time, Khatami's support of this controversial film opened new articulations to his nascent discontent. In other words, *Time for Love* mediated a new discourse that conceived of a fresh political paradigm that existed outside of a revolutionary framework, and in this way, it foresaw the coming of the Reformist Movement.

This chapter examines *Time for Love* and the debates surrounding it to demonstrate that art, and film in particular, helped to shape certain reformist ideas in the early 1990s. Drawing not only on Khatami's statements about the film but also considering reviews by the reformist philosopher 'Abdolkarim Soroush, I argue that it was *Time for Love*'s appropriation of a mystic aesthetic that appealed to these budding reformists and informed their support. During the early 1990s, mysticism represented for those intellectuals who had devoted themselves to Khomeini, the Revolution, and the Islamic Republic a means of reconciling their commitment to Islamic governance with their need and desire to create a more flexible system in order to establish a space for reform. And it is within this context that I locate mysticism as the foundational feature of

the reformist aesthetic. Therefore, Makhmalbaf's appeal to mysticism in *Time for Love* was a significant intellectual strategy; with this film, he shifted the course of his career and reinvented his cinematic vision. This film marked the moment at which Makhmalbaf's aesthetic no longer corresponded with the ideals put forth by the Islamic Republic.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf was born on May 28, 1957 in Tehran and was raised primarily by his religious grandmother. He came of age during the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, and he has cited Khomeini's failed uprising against the Shah in 1963 as one of his earliest memories. In 1972 he formed an urban guerilla resistance coalition and was arrested in 1974 for attacking a police officer.⁸ He remained in prison until 1978 when a wave of revolutionary activity freed him.⁹ After being released from prison, Makhmalbaf turned his attention to more artistic ventures, and he benefitted a great deal from the Islamic Republic's support of cinema shortly after the Revolution.

Makhmalbaf was trained as a filmmaker by the War Film Bureau of *Bonyād-e sinemā 'i-ye fābāri* [Fābāri Cinema Foundation] (FCF), the cinema branch of the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance.¹⁰ He later helped found the cinema section of the Art Center of the Islamic Propaganda Organization (known in Iran as *Howzeh-ye honari*).¹¹

⁸ Makhmalbaf draws on and reenacts that real life experience in his film *Nān va Goldān* [Bread and Flower Pot/Moment of Innocence] (1995).

⁹ Hamid Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large: The Making of a Rebel Filmmaker* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 3-4.

¹⁰ Roxanne Varzi, "A Ghost in the Machine: The Cinema of the Iranian Sacred Defense," *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 157.

¹¹ Saeed Zeydabai-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic* (London: Routledge, 2010), 38-39.

Makhmalbaf's early films represented, therefore, his devotion to the propagation of the Islamic Republic's ideology. His first two films, *Towbeh-ye Nasuh* [Nasuh's Repentance] (1983) and *Do cheshm-e bisu* [Two Sightless Eyes] (1983), are straightforward religious narratives that warn against materialism, promote religion, and encourage participation in the Iran-Iraq War. Scholars Hamid Dabashi and Eric Egan have charted the various stages of Makhmalbaf's career in slightly different ways; however, both scholars agree that by the mid- to late 1990s, his films were considerably different from these early efforts, in terms of both their socio-religious concerns and their quality. By the late 1990s, Makhmalbaf's status as a "major filmmaker" was indisputable, and "he could no longer be dismissed as a committed ideologue of the Islamic Republic."¹² This chapter argues that *Time for Love* marked this significant shift, and mysticism played a crucial role in Makhmalbaf's ability to express his individuality as an artist.

In 1982 filmmakers were hopeful when Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi appointed Mohammad Khatami as the Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance, and they dubbed his first year in office as "the year that love entered cinema."¹³ This historical categorization is useful, because it shows the special relationship that Khatami and cinema shared from the beginning, and it casts this connection in the context of love. In this way, this description of Khatami's tenure as Minister foresees first Makhmalbaf's film *Time for Love* and later the emergence of the Reformist Movement. Throughout the

¹² Hamid Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 12.

¹³ Nimā Hassaninasab, "Zhānr-e dovvom-e Khordād" [The Genre of the Second of Khordad], *Film* 19.270 (2001), 10

Islamic Republic's history, the notion of love has threatened the revolutionary foundation upon which the Islamic Republic was built. This chapter demonstrates how love, and specifically mystic love, functions as an important feature of the reformist movement, both as a political and aesthetic category, and it locates the origins of this powerful intellectual tool in the early 1990s.

The Politics of Cinema and Ownership

Scholars of Iran generally divide the post-Revolution period into two parts, focusing the bulk of their work on either the Islamic Republic under Khomeini or the Reformist movement and Khatami's presidency. However, scholarship has thus far overlooked the reconfiguration of commitment to the Revolution during the first period into a set of Reformist policies that diverge considerably from the original ideals of the Islamic Republic. At what point did the Revolutionary fervor begin to subside and disillusionment set in? This section addresses that question by examining two individuals, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Mohammad Khatami, who played an important role in both periods, and it probes their position in a series of debates that emerged following the release of *Time for Love*. Further, this section seeks to position the *Time for Love* debates as an early sign of the Revolutionary discontent that emerges more fully several years later and in turn suggests that they represent a pivotal moment in the transition from Revolutionary to Reformist policy.

At the core of this discussion—and at the core of the debates it studies—is the question of who controlled art in Iran in the 1990s. The film industry proves especially fruitful to this discussion because the Islamic Republic played a significant role in the production and release of films. Beyond the practice of censorship, the government exerted control over the industry by providing huge subsidies every year. It supplied financial backing for one-third of the country's film production and offered great incentives to the industry as a whole by providing tax-breaks and reduced-interest loans.¹⁴ This dependency developed because the country's rigid censorship practices curtailed viewership and subsequently foreign imports drew greater audiences. Unable to generate enough revenue to cover the costs of production, the Iranian film industry faced extinction in the period after the Revolution. The state recognized the transformative value of film and opted to support the indigenous film industry with such subsidies. We might, subsequently, suggest that this disruption to the supply and demand equilibrium created a need for government support.¹⁵ But with this support came expectation and accountability.

This system gave rise to certain questions about categorization. Should a film be classified as the director's work or does it, in part, belong to the government? Who is accountable for its controversial release? This study is concerned with public perceptions and takes as a case study the Iranian responses to these kinds of concerns in their

¹⁴ Hossein Ghazian, "The Crisis in the Iranian Film Industry and the Role of Government," *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), 77.

¹⁵ Ghazian, "The Crisis in the Iranian Film Industry and the Role of Government," 77-84.

reactions to the film *Time for Love*. This discussion and the popular opinions it conveys serve as a point of resistance, against which we might situate Makhmalbaf and Khatami. In other words, a detailed examination of these debates and the shifts in its trajectory will illuminate emerging fissures and rising discontent among those individuals charged with the creation and regulation of art in the early 1990s. Hamid Naficy has considered these debates in terms of their “immediate impact to the film industry,” suggesting that they “set in motion a period of anxious uncertainty, from which [the industry] emerged relatively unscathed.”¹⁶ However, I would like to reflect on the larger implications of *Time for Love*, as a film and a controversy with a lasting legacy.

Time for Love premiered at the 1369/1991 Fajr Film Festival in Tehran and initially sparked controversy with its decisive depiction of un-Islamic practices in the greater context of moral relativism, a theory to which the director had recently subscribed. The film functions as a complicated and shifting matrix of morality and consists of three distinct episodes, each of which tells the same basic story but with a different ending. In the first section, a married woman, Güzel, has an affair, which her husband ultimately discovers. Outraged and angry, he kills her lover and the episode ends with a judge sentencing him to death. In the second version, Güzel once again has an affair but this time her lover kills her husband and the same judge sentences him to death. Interestingly, the same actor who plays the husband in the first episode plays the lover in

¹⁶ Hamid Naficy, “Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update” *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), 51.

the second. In both episodes, Güzel, distraught by the death of her lover, commits suicide. In the third and final part, the husband (the actor who plays the husband in the first part) once again tries to kill the lover but during the course of their battle the lover grabs the husband's knife and refuses to kill him. The husband, touched by the event, decides to recognize the love between his wife and her lover and plans their wedding. The film ends with the wedding ceremony, where the judge from the first two parts is present as a guest.

While the unyielding order of these three sections marks an important feature of the film, the fluidness of the characters, the actors who play them, and of the three endings suggests that each situation has a series of specific conditions that ultimately determine its outcome, a notion very much wrapped up in the theory of moral relativism. The film asserts that a universal set of morals does not exist and morality is, instead, dependent on circumstance. Makhmalbaf shot and set his film in Turkey, which serves this overall theme and plays on concurrent notions of cultural relativism, but it also loosens the film's ties to Iran.

Despite this distance, people in Iran began reacting to the film almost immediately and the country's newspapers emerged as a kind of interactive forum for debates about the film; writers posited their opinions and reacted to other articles across various publications. The debate as a whole (like the film itself) can be broken into three episodes. Although some overlap exists, each of these three phases represents a specific set of concerns, as the debate slowly evolved from a reaction to a particular film and

director to a full-force critique of the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance, the agency in charge of controlling the art industry in Iran, and its head Mohammad Khatami.

At first articles targeted the director Makhmalbaf and the film *Time for Love* specifically. The lengthy debate began with an article published in *Resālat* [Mission] on February 21, 1991, in which the author M. Shushtari, lamented “Oh God, what do I see? Can this be the same Makhmalbaf that criticized *Golhā-ye dāvudi* [Chrysanthemums]?”¹⁷ Religious groups were outraged that Makhmalbaf, who had played an important part in solidifying the ideology of the new Republic with early films like *Tawbeh-ye Nasuh* [Nasuh’s Repentance] (1983), *Bāykot* [Boycott] (1985) and *Dastforush* [The Peddler] (1987), dared to create a film that was at such odds with Islamic ideals. Hamid Dabashi credits Makhmalbaf with the rise of an “Islamic set of aesthetics” that was “initially squarely at the service of the Islamic Revolution...and the Islamic Republic.”¹⁸ And this film represents the initial decline of that relationship. Shushtari’s disbelief suggests the degree to which Makhmalbaf’s cinematic goals had changed; clearly, *Time for Love* functions quite differently from his previous films. This film explores the possibilities of multiple moralities rather than promoting the Islamic Republic’s single interpretation of morality.

A. Nasrabadi noted this change in Makhmalbaf’s approach to cinema in the article “The Film Festival of 1991: Armed with Love and the Negation of Desire,” published in

¹⁷ M. Shushati, “Jashnvāreh-ye Fajr-e 1369” [The 1369/1991 Fajr Film Festival], *Resālat*, 2 Esfand 1369 / 21 February 1991.

¹⁸ Hamid Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 17.

Keyhān [Universe] on March 2, 1991 and claims that “it is no surprise that the Makhmalbaf of *Nasuh’s Repentance* and *Boycott* has become the Makhmalbaf of...*Time for Love*.” He further remarks on the shifting perception of Makhmalbaf among intellectuals, indicating that secular thinkers, who until recently “were shooting at his shadow,” have reevaluated their position and “today have abandoned their boycott on his films and now include him in the same category as the likes of Shahrnush Parsipur.” Nasrabadi’s alignment of Makhmalbaf with the novelist Shahrnush Parsipur is at once dangerous and in some ways appropriate. Always a controversial and anti-conformist figure, Parsipur was arrested three times by the Islamic Republic. News of her 1990 incarceration for the publication of *Zanān bedun-e mardān* [Women without Men],¹⁹ a book that openly discusses women’s sexuality, likely remained fresh in readers’ minds at this time. And Makhmalbaf’s representation of women’s sexuality in *Time for Love* was similarly problematic. Critics accused him of “defending liberal women who are “gharbzade”²⁰ and “unconstrained.”²¹

And yet not all parties reacted negatively to this particular depiction of love and sexuality. When asked to comment on the film, Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush, an important

¹⁹ Shahrnush Parsipur, *Khāterāt-e zendān* [Prison Memoirs] (Stockholm: Baran, 1996), 396-405; Nasrin Rahimieh, “Overcoming the Orientalist Legacy of Iranian Modernity: Women’s Post-Revolutionary Film and Literary Production,” *Thamyris/Intersecting* 10 (2003), 149.

²⁰ This term might be translated as “west-stricken” or “westoxicated.” This concept became popular in Iran following the publication of Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi* [Westoxification] (1962). In this essay, Al-e Ahmad expands Ahmad Farid’s term *gharbzadegi* and argues that an infatuation with the west is like a plague from which Iran suffers. He offers Shi’i Islam, a source of unaffected locality, as a possible cure to this disease. For more, see Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Plagued by the West*, trans. Paul Sprachman (Delmar, New York: Caravan Books, 1982).

²¹ Abu Sabra, “masales-e bi-‘afti dar *Nawbat-e ‘āsheqi*” [The Impure Triangle in *Nawbat-e ‘āsheqi*], *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi* [The Islamic Republic], 15 Esfand 1369 / 4 March 1991.

reformist philosopher who will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, told *Omid* [Hope] magazine that he did not “understand why earthly love is bad.” He questions whether it “is possible to achieve a higher love without the lower love.” *Nowbat-e āsheqi*, he says, “is about this earthly love” and he “liked it.”

However, Makhmalbaf did more than simply represent women’s sexuality; he also threatened the Islamic Republic’s ethical system²² by proposing an alternative and relativist model for morality. Critics attacked the film as a “condemnation of morality” and an attempt “to make relative morals prevail.”²³ Ali Motahhari²⁴ even suggested that Makhmalbaf put his filmmaking career on hold until he had resolved his “intellectual qualms regarding women and the idea that truths are relative.”²⁵ This statement reaffirms the religious groups’ belief in the influential power of film. Undoubtedly this very notion underlines the system of governmental support of the film industry in Iran. And this arrangement expected cinema to function not as a site of contestation or ambiguity but rather as a medium for the propagation of a certain kind of ideology.

²² I distinguish here between the Islamic Republic’s ethical system and Iranian society’s ethical system, because the Islamic Republic, as a religious government, purports a certain interpretation of Islam and holds its citizens to the moral code born of that interpretation. Makhmalbaf’s film and the reactions it incited allow us to discern the tension between how the Islamic Republic, as a system of governance, perceives what is ethical and how certain segments of Iranian society perceived themselves and their institutions as ethical or non-ethical entities.

²³ Morteza Razavi, “Nawbat-e Nawbeh,” *Abrār*, 6 Farvardin 1370 / 26 March 1991.

²⁴ Ali Motahhari is the son of Morteza Motahhari, a conservative cleric who was killed less than a year after the Revolution. Ali Motahhari is a professor of theology at Tehran University and has a long history of anti-reform. He currently serves as a member of the *Majles* and he was elected on a pro-Ahmadinejad and anti-Reformist platform.

²⁵ Ali Motahhari, “Tekrār-e tārikh va ebtezāl-e farhangi” [The Repetition of History and the Cheapening of Culture], *Ettelā’āt*, 27 Esfand 1369 / 18 March 1991.

In particular, cinema was expected to promote a conservative interpretation of Shi'i Islam that located the value of art in its ability to represent idealized types. In cinema, this interpretation was codified in 1982, when the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance began holding films to a new "Rule of Modesty" that better represented a new "purified" culture.²⁶ The representation of women was especially contentious in this schema, and women were to be limited to characters who embodied the "idealized" Muslim woman, especially in her role as mother and wife. *Time for Love* was problematic according to the rules of modesty that determined the film industry at the time the film was released, because it represented a woman who causes the disintegration of the familial structure with her extra-marital affair. *Time for Love* does more than fail to condemn her actions; the film justifies them by creating a system wherein moral relativity is an idealized possibility.

By threatening the "purified" culture that it was supposed to be promoting, *Time for Love* generated the need for public accountability, and the second wave in the debates consists primarily of attempts to place responsibility for the film's controversial release. As the dispute began to extend beyond the film itself, blame initially rested on the Fajr Film Festival. Critics of the film expressed dismay that "the festival organizers inadvertently allowed the new and improved Makhmalbaf a place in the festival."²⁷ They further suggested that "it is a shame that at the Fajr Film Festival cheap love is taking the

²⁶ Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 8.

²⁷ Sabra Kowsari, *Keyhān*, 12 Esfand 1369 / 3 March 1991.

place of higher love.”²⁸ However, according to the journal *Film*, a statement released by the Festival’s public relations office at this time that neglected to mention *Time for Love* marked its refusal to participate in this debate.²⁹ As a result, people began looking higher for accountability and aimed their attention at the government and specifically at the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance.

N. Mahdyar first articulated this kind of attack in an article called “Defective Criticism is Wrong. We Should Go After the Roots,” published in *Keyhān* on March 14, 1991. The author wondered “which policy charted this downward course for Makhmalbaf.” This line of questioning suggests a provocative causal relationship between official governmental policy and Makhmalbaf’s cinematic work and indicates a significant reversal. Whereas previously his works influenced policy by reinforcing revolutionary mentality, with this film, Mahdyar claimed, policy asserted its influential power over Makhmalbaf. He further argued that “Makhmalbaf is a shining example of the supervised governmental policy over cinema.” And yet Mahdyar’s harshest criticism came with his assertion that *Time for Love*—which had been thoroughly trashed in the newspapers by this point—is “the product of your guidance and support.”³⁰ With this statement, he refocused his point of address and directed his comments specifically at the

²⁸ “Eshq-e mobtabzel dar jashnvāreh-ye fajr” [Cheap Love at the Fajr Film Festival] *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi* [The Islamic Republic], 12 Esfand 1369 / 3 March 1991.

²⁹ “Cheshmandaz-e yek bas,” [Overview of the Discussion], *Film*, no.108 July 1991: 86-94.

³⁰ N. Mahdiar, “Naqd-e ma’lul qalat ast bāyad beh risheh-hā pardākht” [Defective Criticism is Wrong. We Should Go after the Roots], *Keyhān*, 23 Esfand 1369 / March 14, 1991.

Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance. His choice of words, “guidance and support,” served this readdressing purpose by referring to the Ministry’s name.

Gradually criticism against the Ministry became more narrowly focused and its head, Mohammad Khatami, emerged as a primary target. Sa’id Mo’tamedi, for example, addressed the Minister directly and asked: “Mr. Khatami, if you are actually opposed to the cheapness of the West, then why is the film *Hamlet* (in which the lips of a boy and a girl come within a few millimeters of one another) being shown in cinemas right now? Your censors...edit the film in such a way that the viewer can easily guess what has been cut out.”³¹ Mo’tamedi’s question demonstrates the way that this debate, which began squarely focused on Makhmalbaf, had developed into larger commentary on Ministry practices. This author expressed no interest in the lasting legacy of *Time for Love* but used its controversy to call into question Khatami’s own system of beliefs and to censure loosening censorship policies. A second critic, A. Dara’i, also addressed Khatami directly and wrote: “Dear Mr. Khatami...you should have responded to central complaints that have entered the press in the Friday sermons of Qom ...and asked for forgiveness from the people of the Shi’i community (*hezbollah*).”³² This kind of request targeted Khatami as the agent responsible for the content of *Time for Love* and positioned him against a larger religious community.

Dara’i’s comment also alludes to an important feature of the debate: much of the commentary entered the newspapers through the Friday sermons of Qom. And Ahmad

³¹ Sa’id Mo’tamedi, *Resālat*, 25 Esfand 1369 / 16 March 1991.

³² A. Darai, *Resālat*, 14 Esfand 1369 / 17 March 1991.

Jannati, the interim prayer leader of Qom, launched the severest criticism of Khatami and the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance during a Friday sermon on March 7, 1991 that was later published in the newspaper *Ettela'āt*. During his speech, Jannati warned that there is a “movement crawling in the name of art” that threatens the “Islamic Republic, the committed artists, and the Revolution.” He urged his listeners to “put up a serious fight against these kinds of movements.” In an interesting way, Jannati foresaw the Reformist movement and its important relationship with art. He also made an important distinction between those artists still committed to the Revolutionary ideals and those artists who were aligning themselves with this growing movement, and this division may have served as a broad reference to Makhmalbaf and his changing role.

Interestingly, Jannati's speech mirrored in some ways the larger debate at play as he shifted its focus from art and the artist to Khatami and the Ministry. His classification of the movement as something that crawls further suggests this distance and mobility. Later in his speech Jannati claimed, “They brag that our film has been the subject of acclaim and appreciation outside of the country and foreigners conclude that art is alive and well in Iran. What a strange kind of art you've created.”³³ He significantly changed the subject of these two sentences, juxtaposing an ambiguous “they” with an equally indistinct “you.” And yet the space and duality he created between these two subjects remains certain as he relocates his point-of-address on the second-person. This act placed specific blame not on an individual artist but rather on a larger force or system.

³³ Ahmad Jannati, “Sokhanāni az namāz-e jom'eh-ye Qom” [Words from the Friday Prayer of Qom], *Ettela'āt*, 16 Esfand 1369/ 6 March 1991

However, Khatami took this point of address personally and responded to Jannati's remarks directly as a means of commenting on the *Time for Love* controversy for this first time. In a speech published in several newspapers on March 12, 1991, he cautioned that these words "raise doubt and create ambiguity." He attempted to trivialize Jannati's comments and suggested that "it is unlikely that Mr. Jannati has the base of information necessary to assess the cultural and artistic events of this country, including film festivals." Nevertheless, he noted that the "decisiveness" with which he "issues the angriest orders disturbs the peace of mind of the experts who are doing this sensitive work and upsets the cinema." Khatami reiterated this point and requested "forgiveness from all the people knowledgeable of culture and art" for Jannati's comments. He asked "the dear artists and men of culture to tolerate these unkind things with generosity of spirit."³⁴ Khatami made a powerful statement with this seemingly innocent request for forgiveness. Like Darai, he distinguished between the artistic community and religious groups and further suggested that an individual must possess a certain kind of knowledge to evaluate art effectively. This claim precluded the participation of religious officials in the formation of governmental policy that oversees artistic production. Interestingly, with this suggestion, Khatami anticipated the 1992 publication of the Culture Principles of the

³⁴ Mohammad Khatami, "Pāsokh-e vazir-e farhang va ershād-e eslāmi beh sokhanān-e matrah shodeh dar namāz-e jom'eh-ye Qom" [The Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance's Answer to the Words Posited at the Friday Prayer of Qom], *Ettelā'āt* [Information], 21 Esfand 1369 / 12 March 1991.

Islamic Republic, a governmental document which recommends that “the task of handling sociocultural issues...be left to the ‘experts’ and not the clergy.”³⁵

The exchange between Khatami and Jannati touches on a defining feature of this period. A great deal of uncertainty ensued after Khomeini’s death in 1989 and the country’s leaders faced the challenge of reconciling a set of paradoxical policies that he had enacted during his ten-year rule. His various documents codified, in a sense, the aim of the Republic and in his absence administrators were left to their own instincts and powers of interpretation. Fakhreddin Anvar, the Deputy Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance and the head of the Cinema Division, noted the difficulties that came with this uncertainty and classifies “the experience of this year” as “a very sensitive and complicated episode.” However, he defended the Ministry’s actions during this time and contends that “we have been very successful.”³⁶ But ultimately the variety of responses to the Ministry’s “success” that emerged during the course of these debates signified the factionalism that marks the post-Khomeini period.

Khatami’s response warrants additional consideration and will be examined further; however, it remains significant here because it represented the third shift in the *Time for Love* debates. During this final period in the debate, people initially responded to Khatami’s statement and reiterated many of the same points. However, one might best classify this wave of reactions as the artistic response. At this point, a series of directors

³⁵ Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2002): 167.

³⁶ Fakhreddin Anvar “Sinemā-ye Iran beh cheh zorurat’hā’i pasokh midehad?” [To what needs does Iran’s Cinema respond?] *Ettelā’āt*, 16 Esfand 1369/ 6 March 1991.

began commenting on the controversy at hand. Many of these filmmakers attempted to distance themselves from the two figures at the center of the storm, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance. Seyfollah Dad, for example, in an article called “The Identity of Iranian Filmmakers,” suggested that one of the mistakes in the current debates is “confusing the identity of current cinema in Iran with Mohsen Makhmalbaf.” He also reminded readers that film did not serve as a “reflection of...the state or the Ministry of Guidance.” He ends his article with a poetic warning by Rumi: “In Balkh an ironsmith sinned/ in Shustar they cut the neck of an ironsmith.”³⁷ This couplet served as a caution against the kind of generalization that rests at the center of these debates. In many ways, this wave of response represented the beginning of the breakdown of the connection between politics and cinema that was constructed in the second phase of the debate. With this breakdown came the dissolution of the perception of a heavy-handed relationship between cinema and the Ministry.

As writers like Dad downplayed the significance of the interplay between politics and cinema, the notion of aesthetics re-emerged as a central concern of the debate. These responses remained critical of Makhmalbaf. In an article called “Cinema and the Course of West-Stricken (*qarbzade*) Intellectualism,” director Rahim Rahimpur, critical of a cinematic trajectory that would permit a film like *Nasuh’s Repentance* to give way to *Time for Love*, indicated that “If [Iranian cinema] continues down this path, only God knows where it will end up.” He suggests that Iranian society should be “worried

³⁷ Seyfollah Dad, “Hoviyyat-e sinemā va sinemāgar-e Irāni” [The Identify of Iranian Cinema and Filmmakers], *Resālat*, 7 Farvardin 1369/27 March 1991.

and concerned that *Little Jungle Boy*, who has gotten married and settled down, gave up his battles to present the history of Islam and the Islamic Revolution through cinema.”³⁸ With this clear reference to Makhmalbaf, Rahimipour insinuated that the director has gone soft with his depiction of love in *Time for Love* and criticized Makhmalbaf’s neglect of more serious issues affecting the country at that time. Rahimipour lamented the fact that Iran does not “even have one example of one film in line with the goals of the regime and reconstruction after the war.”³⁹ With this article, the debate came full circle, as it once again examined the purpose of film. However, whereas previously criticism was very much tied up in what film should not do (e.g. promote moral relativism), this artistic response was concerned more with what film should attempt to do (e.g. reinforce reconstruction efforts after the Iran-Iraq War).

At this point, the debate as a cohesive body began to break down. A unified set of concerns no longer drives the responses and the discussion slowly tapers off as authors attempt to submit their final thoughts. By the end of April, *Time for Love* and the related disputes no longer appear regularly in the main newspapers. In June the monthly journal *Film* published a follow-up report that summarized some of the major exchanges of the debate and officially brought the controversy to a close. The preceding examination

³⁸ The original Persian reads:

...ما نگران و ناراحت کوچک جنگلی باشیم که عروس شد و خانه نشین و دست از مبارزات خود برای معرفی تاریخ اسلام و انقلاب اسلامی به ویسله‌ی سینما شست.

The author is playing with the titles of films and is referencing another downward trend (in his opinion) that is similar to the course that led from *Towbeh-ye Nasuh* to *Nawbat-e ‘āsheqi*.

³⁹ “Sinemā va jarayān-e roshanfekri-ye qarbzade” [Cinema and the Course of West-Stricken Intellectualism], *Keyhān*, 1 Ordebehsht 1369 / 21 April 1991.

charts some of the major concerns of the *Time for Love* debates and at the same time highlights the public's overwhelmingly negative response to the film. This communal reaction indicated that the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance had—whether intentionally or unintentionally—loosened its grip on the control of the art world and had challenged the limits of cultural expression in Iranian society at that time. The disconnect between the public criticism of the film and Khatami and Makhmalbaf's open defense, an analysis of which will form the basis of the remainder of this section, suggests that while society in the spring of 1991 by and large situated art in the hands of the government, Khatami and Makhmalbaf provided agency to the artist himself.

Ultimately, the release of *Time for Love* and the controversy surrounding it suggested a shift in policy, both personal and political. This episode represented a critical moment for both men. Khatami and Makhmalbaf had played important roles in the Republic's first decade but their support of this film reveals that their beliefs were no longer in line with the ideals of the conservative revolutionaries. With this film Mohsen Makhmalbaf declared his independence as an artist and no longer accepted his role as the propagator of the Islamic Republic's ideology. Dabashi notes that "Makhmalbaf's early career was...seriously implicated in...the Islamic Republic" and his works played an "integral" part in its reign.⁴⁰ The release of *Time for Love*, however, marked Makhmalbaf's move away from this "early career." This shift in the way Makhmalbaf perceived himself and his relationship to the government was evident in the two public

⁴⁰ Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 47-48.

responses he issued. In the first press release, published relatively early in the debates on March 10, 1991, he indicated that “the writer of these lines knows very well that these disputes don’t even have anything to do with him and the dispute is ...between the power-hungry forces.”⁴¹ Whereas previously Makhmalbaf’s role was very much tied up in this struggle for power, at this point he was distancing himself from that process.

In his second statement, issued several weeks later and appropriately during the wave of artistic responses, Makhmalbaf addresses an “open letter” to “Dear Mr. Mehdi Nasri, Brother who is committed and revolutionary.” However, he quickly corrects himself and writes, “Pardon me, A. Nasrabadi, the managing director and actually the one who does everything at *Keyhān*!” With this introduction, Makhmalbaf alluded to the fact that Mehdi Nasri, the Managing Director of the newspaper *Keyhān*, had written a series of articles against the film, Makhmalbaf, and the Ministry under the name “A. Nasrabadi.” He attacked Nasri’s failure to sign his articles with his own name and accused him of “benefiting from behind the curtain.” Makhmalbaf asked, “If you claim to have faith, why don’t you stand behind your words?” However, his most telling statement came when he continued with this line of questioning and inquires, “Don’t we, the artists of your country, stand like men under your beating sticks with our real names?”⁴² Makhmalbaf’s emphasis on names and signing one’s work functioned as a way of

⁴¹ Mohsen Makhmalbaf, “Vaqt foru resid...” [The Time Has Come...], *Omid*, 19 Esfand 1369 / 10 March 1991.

⁴² Mohsen Makhmalbaf, “Nāmeḥ-ye sargoshade” [An Open Letter], *Omid* 10 Farvardin 1369 / 30 March 1991.

reaffirming his agency; he accepts responsibility for the controversy but also asserting the film as his own.

Textual as well as this contextual evidence points to Makhmalbaf's shifting policy and, indeed, his greatest statement of discontent and most consequential attempt to repurpose his filmic vision remains the film *Time for Love* itself. The film's title is especially telling in this regard. *Nowbat-e 'āsheqi* means either "Time for Love" or "Love's Turn." Both translations fittingly convey the idea that Makhmalbaf and/or Iranian society had reached a moment in its post-Revolution history in which it was appropriate to discuss love. The film's sequence of events carries an equally significant message. The first two episodes are wrought with violence and the three main characters die in both. However, the third part marks the characters' willingness to transcend the violence and give love a chance. Makhmalbaf ends his film with this alternative perspective, and from the vantage point of a progressive narrative, films, especially those portrayals that make no claim to represent an historical event, often leave the viewer with the impression that the final scene correlates with the present. This notion is further supported by the fact that the post-Revolutionary period in Iran at this time (like the film itself) might be divided into three parts. The Revolution of 1978-79 and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), like the first two sections of the film, were incredibly violent. At the time this film was initially released, the third phase (the period immediately following the war) was just taking shape. This film, therefore, represents Makhmalbaf's attempt to steer the trajectory of that period away from violence and towards love. However, this

navigational attempt may have been at the cost of his relationship with the Iranian government.

Hamid Dabashi suggests that *Time for Love* and *Shabihā-ye zāyandeh rud* [The Nights of the Zayandeh River] (1991) are “excellent exercises in philosophical relativism but as ‘films’ entirely useless, trite, and prosaic” and “add nothing to Makhmalbaf’s cinematic career...”⁴³ However, the preceding analysis effectively demonstrates that *Time for Love* determined a trajectory in Makhmalbaf’s career and served as a pivotal moment, in which he asserted ownership of and control over his own cinematic vision and emerged successfully from a period of artistic juvenilia.

In his letter to Mehdi Nasri, Makhmalbaf argued that the managing editor remained interested only in “ridiculing the Ministry.”⁴⁴ Nasri’s eagerness to criticize the Ministry may very well have rested in the agency’s move away from the conservative policies of the Republic under Khomeini. Mohammad Khatami was responsible for steering the Ministry in this new direction and his reaction, as Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance, to the *Time for Love* debates highlights his growing discontent in the post-Khomeini period. This kind of discontent was contingent on expectations that grow out of serious investment in a particular cause. Like Makhmalbaf, who promoted the Islamic Republic’s ideology through his films, Khatami contributed significantly to the formation of the Islamic Republic. His affiliation with the Revolution dated back to a period when

⁴³ Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 53.

⁴⁴ Mohsen Makhmalbaf, “Nāmeḥ-ye sargoshadeh” [An Open Letter], *Omid* 10 Farvardin 1369 / 30 March 1991.

the Revolution had not yet been fully conceived. In 1961 he began studying under Khomeini in Qom and in 1979 at Khomeini's urging he left his post as chair of the Islamic Centre in Hamburg, Germany to return to Iran and participate in the events unfolding. Immediately following the Revolution, he served as a representative in the *Majles* and acted as the head of the Keyhān Publishing House. In 1982 Khomeini appointed Khatami as the Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance.⁴⁵ By the time that *Time for Love* premiered at the 1991 Fajr Film Festival, Khatami had been at the service of the Republic for over a decade.

Khatami resigned from the Ministry in 1992, citing a "violation" of "all legal, religious, ethical, and secular norms" in the "field of culture." He further foresaw the arrival of an "unhealthy and turbulent atmosphere" and the "discouragement and insecurity of...thinkers and artists."⁴⁶ However, his clash with the country's religious conservatives and this notable shift in ideology were not without precedent at that point. And, indeed, his response to the *Time for Love* episode a year earlier brings to focus emerging cracks in his commitment to the Revolutionary ideals. On this issue, Khatami gave one speech, which I examined previously as I reflected on Ahmad Jannati's criticism of the country's film industry. In this speech, after addressing Jannati directly, Khatami moved on to a broader consideration of the film *Time for Love* and the complaints launched against the Ministry. He suggested that he is proud of the Ministry

⁴⁵ Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 196-7.

⁴⁶ "Saranjām Doktor Khātami raft" [Dr. Khatami Has Finally Left], *Adineh*, no. 72 (Mordad 1371/ August 1992), 5.

for “holding steadfast” as weak and narrow-minded people “try to load their own political and cultural agenda on the society as a whole.” He defended in this way the liberalization of his organization.

However, the significant ideological shift that took place during the course of his speech extends beyond simple defense. Khatami also asserted that “today our society is facing great tragedies” and he located the root of these problems in the “judicious and courageous confrontation by his eminence Imam Khomeini with this trend and the terror that he caused on various occasions and the fatwa and the provocative opinions he had concerning every area, especially cultural and artistic...”⁴⁷ With this statement, Khatami remains respectful of Khomeini and indicates the necessity of his drastic measures. At the same time, Khatami felt limited by the policies of the Revolution, especially with regard to artistic expression. Interestingly, just as Makhmalbaf’s film *Time for Love* promoted a kind of moral relativism, so too does Khatami’s statement advocate for the possibility of relativity in policymaking. In other words, he subtly suggested that in the post-Revolution period, the policies and aims of the Republic must adjust to fit the changing conditions and political environment. This philosophy later emerges in his letter of resignation, in which he employs much of the same imagery, including an ominous future and the political disruption of artistic expression. Ultimately, this philosophy guides the Reformist Movement that Khatami helped to articulate and is demonstrated in his own

⁴⁷ Mohammad Khatami, “Pāsokh-e vazir-e farhang va ershād-e eslāmi beh sokhanān-e matrah shodeh dar namāz-e jom’eh-ye Qom” [The Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance’s Answer to the Words Posited at the Friday Prayer of Qom], *Ettelā’āt*, 21 Esfand 1369 / 12 March 1991.

1997 presidential campaign platform “hokumat-e qānun” [rule of law], which at once referenced and positioned itself against Revolutionary slogan “hokumat-e eslāmi” [Islamic rule].⁴⁸

Mystic Love, Reformist Philosophy

Although Mohsen Makhmalbaf released two public statements during the course of the *Time for Love* debates, his most powerful declaration on the topic remains the film itself. Just as the controversy surrounding the film suggested a move towards the individualization of the production of art, so too does the film promote the individual experience of religious, moral, and ethical systems. *Time for Love* engages a long mystic tradition within Persian poetics in order to advocate an alternative to the Islam promoted by the Islamic Republic. Abdolkarim Soroush, an important reformist philosopher at the time, wrote several favorable reviews of *Time for Love*, and his open and enthusiastic support invites a comparison between his philosophies and the film that ultimately underscores mysticism as an aesthetic feature of the Reformist genre. Further, this cinematic revival of mysticism imbues the tradition with new forms of political meaning previously unexplored.

Scholars have drawn comparisons between Makhmalbaf and Soroush, but these analyses do not consider material interactions between these two intellectuals. Previous

⁴⁸ Saïd Amir Arjomand, “The Rise and Fall of Khatami and the Reformist Movement in Iran,” *Constellations* 12 no.4 (Winter 2004), 507.

attempts to consider these two intellectuals together have not engaged Soroush's commentary on Makhmalbaf's films or any other tangible exchange between them. Instead, this body of scholarship compares broad trends in these two individuals' philosophical and intellectual works and their shared experiences within the Islamic Republic. In his comprehensive study of Makhmalbaf, Eric Egan argues in general that Soroush undertook the intellectual work of justifying religiously Mohammad Khatami's notion of civil society through "attacks" on the "religio-political manifestations of the Islamic Republic."⁴⁹ This act, which in part permitted the rise of civil society in popular and public discourse, "meant a relaxation of the censorship laws" for filmmakers like Makhmalbaf.⁵⁰ Hamid Dabashi sees both Makhmalbaf and Soroush as "moral and intellectual by-products"⁵¹ of an Islamic revolution intended to overturn a monarchy with deep imperial ties and interests.⁵² As such, Soroush and Makhmalbaf add respectively "metaphysical (other-worldly)" and "artistic (aesthetically emancipatory)" dimensions to the "political resistance to the classical colonialization of Iranians."⁵³

⁴⁹ Eric Egan, *The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics, and Culture in Iran* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2005), 172.

⁵⁰ Egan, *The Films of Makhmalbaf*, 174

⁵¹ It is interesting to note that as Dabashi positions Soroush and Makhmalbaf as important figures in the process of emancipating the post-colonial subject, his use of the word "by-product" here denies them a kind of agency that is important to both of their philosophies. He further denies them agency by suggesting that "Makhmalbaf and Soroush do not have complete control or even awareness that in their respective works they are dealing with epistemic and aesthetic parameters beyond the limits of any specific (Islamic) culture" (20). I argue that these two individuals' espousal of mysticism as a means of accessing an individual religious and political experience is crucial to an agency overlooked by Dabashi.

⁵² Hamid Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large: The Making of a Rebel Filmmaker* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 18.

⁵³ Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 18.

Yet for Dabashi these two thinkers are separated by differing “modes of creative emancipation...from the colonial trappings of agential de-subjection.”⁵⁴ Whereas he sees Soroush as “epistemically trapped” in the “dialectical paradoxes of Enlightenment modernity in its colonial shadows,”⁵⁵ Dabashi envisions Makhmalbaf’s “creative outbursts” as offering “a far more emancipatory track out of that cul-de-sac.” The difference crucially emerges from their respective methodologies. Soroush seeks “moral and political agency” by staging a “hermeneutic encounter...between Islam and Enlightenment modernity.”⁵⁶ Makhmalbaf, on the other hand, navigates this terrain “artistically,” which renders his work less vulnerable to colonial subjugation. While Dabashi astutely notes a historical and intellectual connection between Makhmalbaf and Soroush, his anti-imperialist agenda overshadows the creative and aesthetic ruptures that unite these two thinkers. In particular, mysticism acts as a force that marries Soroush’s and Makhmalbaf’s philosophical and creative efforts. Because mysticism and Sufism share long, historical ties with Persian poetry and Iranian culture, they are less susceptible to “epistemic trappings” and therefore allow me to move beyond the post-colonial discourse that limits – and even traps – Dabashi’s own analysis of this important relationship.

Before expounding the political potential of mysticism as a feature of the Reformist aesthetic, it is important to establish *Time for Love* as a film invested in and

⁵⁴ Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 19.

⁵⁵ Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 19.

⁵⁶ Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 19-20

indebted to the Persian mystic tradition.⁵⁷ Two important Sufi concepts, *ma'refat* [knowing God] and *haqiqat* [reality, truth], inform this mystic exploration of *Time for Love*, and the ideas and poetry of Jalāl al-Din Rumi prove instructive in my effort to classify *Time of Love* as a representative example of cine-mysticism in Iran in the early 1990s. My application of Rumi is particularly relevant here because both Makhmalbaf and Soroush have professional connections to Rumi. Makhmalbaf has on several occasions quoted Rumi in reference to his films, and Soroush, in addition to being a lay religious thinker, is a scholar of Rumi and has edited an authoritative edition of his *Masnavi*.⁵⁸ By coupling these tenets of mysticism with Makhmalbaf's published philosophy about the film, it is possible to recover the mystic qualities that underpin *Time for Love*.

In his far-reaching study of Rumi, Franklin Lewis describes the Sufi concept of *ma'refat* as “an intuitive and experiential knowing of God...achieved not by studying the

⁵⁷ Gilda Boffa, “A Study of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's ‘Time of Love’s’ Intertextual References to Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi's Poem ‘The Three Fish,’” *Offscreen* 10, no. 7 (2006) also considers the film in mystic terms. Boffa's analysis of the mystic elements in *Love's Turn* is based on a comparison she stages between Makhmalbaf's film and Rumi's famous poem “The Three Fish,” which she claims is the inspiration for the film. While her reading is productive in that she establishes some similarities between the poem and the film, Boffa overstates her suggestion that the poem directly informs the film. Her argument is, in fact, based on a misreading of the main character's name. She writes, “Countless elements in the film provide hints that Makhmalbaf was deeply influenced by mystic poetry in the making of *Time for Love*. The name of the main female character for example, is Ghazal.” She goes on to connect this name to the *ghazal*, a traditional poetic form employed by Rumi. However, the main character's name is actually Güzel, a Turkish name meaning beauty. In the film's Persian *filmnāme*, the character's name is written گزل, which should not be confused with غزل, the word for the poetic form. In *The Films of Makhmalbaf*, Eric Egan also connects *Time for Love* to poetry and focuses on particular symbols that he sees as poetic (132-135). However, he fails to connect these symbols to any mystic tradition.

⁵⁸ For more on the relationship between Rumi and Soroush, see Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: Life, Teaching, and Poetry Jalāl al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 493-495

law, but by loving God.”⁵⁹ In order to illustrate this categorization, he cites Rumi’s famous verse:

Love resides
not in learning
not in knowledge
not in pages and pamphlets
Wherever the debates of men may lead
that is not the lovers’ path⁶⁰

The centrality of love to the mystic experience in Persian literature is well-documented in Annemarie Schimmel’s now classic book *As through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam*. Perhaps slightly overstating the case, she argues that while Persian mystic poets draw on three categories of symbols, “the center of their thoughts is always Love.”⁶¹ However, Schimmel is quick to identify the metaphoric nature of this love and she draws on the proverb “*al-majāz qantaratu ’l-haqīqa*” [The metaphor is the bridge that leads to Truth]. Indeed, Persian mystical poetry depends on the tension between human love and Divine love, wherein the former may—but not necessarily—function as a metaphor for the latter. Schimmel, like Lewis, also notes the opposition between love and intellect in the mystic tradition. For the mystic poets, she claims, “reason, or intellect, leads to talk while Love silently reveals the inside of the mysteries.”⁶²

The title *Time for Love* underscores the centrality of love in Makhmalbaf’s film, and the public debates surrounding it similarly suggest that love was a point of concern

⁵⁹ Lewis, *Rumi*, 24.

⁶⁰ Lewis, *Rumi*, 24.

⁶¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *As Though a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press 1982), 64.

⁶² Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, 67.

for audiences. These published debates indicate that by and large the public considered the film's representation of love in earthly terms. Hamid Naficy notes that other films at the 1991 Fajr Film Festival were celebrated for their representations of "spiritual and mystic love."⁶³ The present study attempts to recover *Time for Love* from a strictly carnal reading of love and attribute to it the appropriate and timely mystical elements.

Abdolkarim Soroush was the first to consider the romantic qualities of *Time for Love* in divine terms when he asked of the film whether it "is possible to achieve a higher love without the lower love?"⁶⁴ In a second essay, he expanded on the metaphoric power of love in the film and wrote that "being in love is not emphasized or treated topically" in *Time for Love* but rather love functions as "proof" in a more complicated case study on the human experience.⁶⁵

Mohsen Makhmalbaf's own philosophy of the film, which was published in three-volume collection of essays and reviews called *Gong-e kh^vāb dideh* [Muted Dreams] (1993), picks up on Soroush's classification of the film as mysticism and, like the mystic poets of the classical Persian tradition, considers the concept of love both in metaphoric relation to the Divine and at odds with intellectualism. It is worth noting that *kh^vāb dideh* is an idiom in Persian that describes the disorientation of waking up from a dream and recognizing the physical shapes of reality once again. This title is fitting for

⁶³ Hamid Naficy, "Veiled Vision/Powerful Presences," *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema*, ed. Rose Issa and Sheila Wutcher (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 60.

⁶⁴ Abdolkarim Soroush, "Nobat-e 'āsheqi," *Omid*, 12 Esfand 1369 / 3 March 1991.

⁶⁵ Abdolkarim Soroush, "Moshkel hekāyati ast keh taqrir mikonand" *Gong-e kh^vāb dideh* [Muted Dreams] vol. 3, ed. Mohsen Makhmalbaf (Tehran: Nashr-e nay, 1374), 326.

Makhmalbaf's work, because the state of *gong-e kh^vāb dideh* describes the director's career and especially his disillusionment with the dream of the Revolution. In this scheme, *Time for Love* is the moment of *gong-e kh^vāb dideh*: Makhmalbaf's recognition of the restrictive realities of the Islamic Republic that are in contrast to the promises that the Revolution promised.

In *Gong-e kh^vāb dideh*, Makhmalbaf's notes on *Time for Love* interrogate and ultimately collapse two binary oppositions: *manteq-e sar*, *manteq-e del* [logic of the mind, logic of the heart] and '*eshq-e zamini*, '*eshq-e āsemāni* [earthly love, heavenly love]. The tension generated in *Time for Love* between and through these opposing forces ultimately imbues the film with mystic potential. In his discussion of logic, Makhmalbaf begins with a statement that appeals to the rational mind: the whole is bigger than the part.⁶⁶ However, according to the director, *Time for Love* allows us to image how the heart's logic functions differently from the mind's, in such a way that this generally accepted truth about the relationship between the whole and the part no longer seems rational.

Two moments in the film demonstrate the ways in which the heart's logic triumphs over the mind's rationale. In the film's first section, Güzel's husband, to whom Makhmalbaf refers in both the screenplay and his other writings about the film as *mu-meshki* [dark-haired one], accepts his death sentence and insists, "I am content because I have defended my honor." As Makhmalbaf notes, logically one's honor represents only

⁶⁶ Mohsem Makhmalbaf, "Nawbat-e 'āsheqi: yāddāsht-e kārgardān" [*Time for Love*: Director's Notes], *Gong-e kh^vāb dideh* [Muted Dreams] vol. 3, ed. Mohsen Makhmalbaf (Tehran: Nashr-e nay, 1374), 306.

one part of one's life as a whole.⁶⁷ The husband's willingness to sacrifice his life to defend his honor confounds the proportional relationship between the whole and the part. Yet this act does not strike the viewer as unreasonable because it appeals to an emotional logic, according to which the desire to defend one's honor is bigger and more urgent than life itself.

Similarly, in the first two sections of the film, Güzel commits suicide because her lover, her true beloved, dies, first at the hands of her husband and later at the hands of the justice system. Here again one might reasonably argue that love represents but one piece of life as a whole. However, Güzel's desire to forsake the whole for the benefit of the part conforms to the same emotional logic, a logic that resonates more soundly with human desire than the rationalized and rationalizing logic for which humans often strive. *Time for Love* asserts the differences implicit in the mind's logic and the heart's logic, but the film also shows that human experience privileges the latter. The characters make decisions based on emotional rather than rational impulses, and it is only by deferring to the undeniable pull of an emotional logic that the viewer is able to make sense of the characters' actions and reactions. Makhmalbaf argues that "if it weren't so, we would have to consider all of the people in this story raving mad."⁶⁸

The strain between these differing modes—emotional and rational, heart and mind—is captured in the film by the two characters Güzel and her mother, representing the emotional and the rational respectively. At one point in the film, the mother pleas,

⁶⁷ Makhmalbaf, *Gong-e kh^vāb dideh*, 307.

⁶⁸ Makhmalbaf, *Gong-e kh^vāb dideh*, 308.

“My daughter, not all of life is love,” and this statement stresses for both Güzel and the viewer that the whole is bigger and more valuable than the part. The film further exposes the mother’s rational attempts when Güzel is in the hospital and asks why she was not allowed to choose her own husband. The mother replies by explaining that she chose a husband for Güzel based on two achievements: completion of military service and ownership of a taxi. For the mother, these two accomplishments make the husband a rational choice; he is responsible and has the means to provide financial stability. In general, he can provide a good quality of life, which is ultimately more urgent than the pull of love. However, shortly after hearing this reasoning, Güzel kills herself, and the implication for the viewer is clear. While rational thought appeals to a logic of the mind, it cannot compete with the emotional logic that often determines one’s life decisions.

Mystic love, like the kind represented in Makhmalbaf’s *Time for Love*, defies simple categorization, and the film’s third section complicates the privileging of the heart’s logic that is established in the first two sections. The viewer understands by the time the third sequence begins that the love that Güzel shares with her beloved is greater than life itself. It is worth dying for, and the film’s third cycle allows the viewer to imagine that love realized in a moment foreseen by the thirteen-century Persian poet Fakhr al-Din ‘Erāqi, who describes the coalescence of lover, beloved, and love.⁶⁹ Güzel and her lover not only live but are married, and their love is sanctioned by her husband in what should be an idyllic ending. However, the film’s final words rupture the possibility

⁶⁹ Fakhr al-Din ‘Erāqi, *Kolliyiāt*, Lama’āt, no. 2 (quoted in Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, 70).

of happiness for its protagonist. The lover says, “We’re finally together,” and Güzel replies, “I’m still not happy.” The film’s conclusion thereby accords with ‘Erāqi’s assessment that “The separation which is the aim of the beloved/Is a thousand times better than the union.”⁷⁰

Indeed, it is the failure of this love’s realization in *Time for Love* that permits its assumption of metaphoric meaning, and within the mystic tradition romantic concerns most commonly signal divine love. In his notes, Makhmalbaf interrogates the categories of ‘*eshq-e zamini* [earthly love] and ‘*eshq-e āsemāni* [heavenly love]. He aptly observes some of the shades of gray that naturally exist between these two interconnected concepts; he notes, for example, that love between a man and his wife is earthly because it is physical but divine because it has been sanctioned religiously. However, the director arrives at the firm conclusion that sexual acts undoubtedly fall into a carnal category, regardless of their relationship to love. He indicates that it is significant that Güzel’s love is never consummated even after it has been sanctioned.⁷¹ The lack of sexuality leaves her love within the realm of mystic possibility because it does not preclude the possibility of a divine or heavenly connotation. That Güzel’s desires are not sexualized within the narrative is significant insofar as it both demonstrates the shortsightedness of most critics who objected to the film’s carnality at the time of its release and confirms—contrary to these critics’ objections—the mystic possibility of the love represented by *Time for Love*. As Schimmel argues, “the constant oscillation between the two levels of experience” fills

⁷⁰ ‘Erāqi, *Kolliyāt*, Lama’āt, no. 22 (quoted in Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, 69).

⁷¹ Makhmalbaf, *Gong-e kh’āb dideh*, 312-313.

the mystic tradition with an “ambiguity between the human and superhuman levels” that ultimately defines it. The love for which Makhmalbaf calls in his film exists in a similar ambivalence.

The very notion of ambivalence that defines this cinematic representation of love resonates with a second mystic principal engendered by *Time for Love*. At the same time that the film creates, through its various episodes, altering and differing meanings of love contingent on a slippery and shifting system of context and pretense, it also more generally theorizes the existence of multiple realities and their corresponding relativities. In his director’s notes, Makhmalbaf insists that *Time for Love* is philosophical at its core, and for him it is the possibility of multiple avenues constructed from a set of unique circumstances and the film’s interest in exploring those circumstances that ultimately lend it its philosophical character.⁷² The very possibility of circumstance generates multiple realities and truths, and this notion in *Time for Love* recalls self-consciously a similar idea in mystic poetry. On at least two occasions, and once in direct reference to this film, Makhmalbaf has alluded to a well-known anecdote from Rumi that illustrates this idea:

The truth is a mirror that shattered as it fell from the hand of God. Everyone picked up a piece of it, and each decided that the truth was what he saw reflected in his fragment rather than realizing that the truth had become fragmented among them all.⁷³

⁷² Makhmalbaf, *Gong-e kh’āb dideh*, 299-300.

⁷³ Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema Past, Present, Future* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2001): 212. In an interview with Heike Hurst, Makhmalbaf claims that in *Time for Love* he tried to approximate cinematically the ideas conveyed in that Rumi anecdote. For more, see Heike Hurst, “Makhmalbaf questionne le pouvoir,” *Jeune Cinéma* 247 (May-June 1996), 19.

In his director's notes, Makhmalbaf similarly describes his project as an exploration into the "role of 'circumstance' on the fate of every single human being."⁷⁴ Thus, it is individualization of the reception of truth that occupies a paramount position in *Time for Love*. Soroush sees the film in a comparable light and argues that what the film promotes is the idea that whether an event is "good or bad, right or wrong, when two people change places, they are like one another."⁷⁵ For Soroush *Time for Love* brings to focus the fact that circumstance can for two individuals create "two spheres, wherein one finds fault in the other and one is even willing to kill another."⁷⁶

This analysis by Soroush underscores an important and often overlooked feature of *Time for Love*. Although many of the discussions and debates about the film revolve around Güzel and her propriety, it is actually the two men who function as variables in the film and participate as subjects in Makhmalbaf's study. This feature is inscribed visually by the film's actors and its mise-en-scène. It is significant that the actress who plays Güzel remains the same in all three sections, and the character's circumstances leading up to the film's events remain similarly consistent: she has fallen in love with a man who is not her husband. The film reinforces visually the character's stability throughout the three episodes, and each episode begins with the same shot of Güzel standing in front of a house right before a train passes in front of the camera. The film

⁷⁴ Makhmalbaf, *Gong-e kh'āb dideh*, 300-301.

⁷⁵ Soroush, "Moshkel hekāyati ast keh taqrir mikonand," 325.

⁷⁶ Soroush, "Moshkel hekāyati ast keh taqrir mikonand," 325-326.

also ends with the same shot, which suggests the continuation of this pattern and the possibility of other truths and realities beyond those posited by the film's three episodes.

It is ultimately the consistency of the representation of Güzel that signals for the viewer the repetition of the film's main narrative in each of the three sections.

Makhmalbaf replicates exactly certain frames of Güzel from the first episode in the second. At other times, the director stages a frame in the second episode in exactly the same manner as the first, but while Güzel's placement remains the same, the male characters have switched places. Each instance reveals Güzel and her circumstances as constants while the men switch and change, and it is their shifting circumstances that prove to be of interest to the director and his film.

Because the men in *Time for Love* are only identified in the film's screenplay by their physical characteristics, *mu-meshki* [dark-haired] and *mu-bur* [blonde], and not by names, when the actors switch roles in the second episode, one must assume that the characters have similarly changed places. Through the switching male actors and characters, the film imagines multiple possibilities and realities, each conditioned by a particular set of circumstances. Quite simply, *Time for Love* creates the opportunity for two rivals to act according to the other's circumstances. The film's second section, for example, creates the possibility that if fate had granted the blonde lover of the first section a taxi and a certificate of military completion (like the dark-haired man of the first episode), then he would have been Güzel's husband. However, by being her husband he is denied her love. Similarly, if the husband in the first section possessed neither a taxi

nor a certification of military completion, then he might have become Güzel's lover, privy to a love he was denied in the role of her husband. And this possibility becomes his fate in the film's second section. A complex web of circumstances and conditions thereby defines both men and their relationships to Güzel, and by engendering an empathetic perspective, wherein the viewer is made to consider the circumstances of both men before reaching conclusions about their actions, *Time for Love* advocates a new relative order in which both text and context determine morality.

Despite their investment in the role of shifting and varying circumstances, both the first and second episodes of the film conclude similarly. The dark-haired character slays the light-haired character and receives a death sentence, and meanwhile the death of her lover inspires Güzel to commit suicide in both episodes. The dark-haired man's role changes from husband to lover, but his act of violence and the violence he inspires in Güzel remain the same. With these sources of continuity between the first and second episodes, *Time for Love* considers the possibility that these moments of violence are predestined and unalterable, despite the different routes and conditions that ushered their arrival. The kind of predestination that the film posits, in which multiple paths—each conditioned by unique circumstances—coalesce at a single reality, evokes the Sufi concept of *haqiqat* [truth or reality]. While the mystic poets of the Persian tradition use the word *haqiqat* in a number of ways, including its literal meaning of truth, which is the meaning suggested in the Rumi anecdote quoted by Makhmalbaf, as a concept the word usually refers to the final stage of *ma'rifat* or knowing God. Sufi thought suggests that

there are an endless number of individual (and individualized) paths or *tāriqs* that arrive at this stage. *Time for Love*, as a contemporary interpretation of the mystic tradition, engages similar questions about the meaning of truth and the multiple and twisting roads that lead to it.

Just as the film's third section confounds its established commentary on love, so too does this third episode betray a critique of the predestination explored in the first two sections. Makhmalbaf has suggested that the film's third episode is intended to reflect on "the relative role of man's freedom"⁷⁷ His use of the word "relative" suggests his unwillingness to forego completely the notion of fate; however, *Time for Love* suggests with its third episode the ability of one's free will to break free of historical cycles. Although the blond lover has the opportunity to kill the dark-haired husband, he refuses, arguing that "We were not put on this world to kill each other so I will not kill you. But I am willing to be killed by you for the sake of my love." It is the revelation of this circumstance—the strength of the love shared between Güzel and her blond lover, a love for which he is willing to die—that inspires the dark-haired man both to spare the lover's life and to sanction his wife's love for him. Within the film's narrative, an understanding of individual circumstances and contexts deliver a time for love and of peace. *Time for Love* by extension calls on Iranian society to consider the possibility of a moral relativity, which is based upon the acknowledgement of current circumstances and empowered to alter the course of the individual and political experience.

⁷⁷ Makhmalbaf, *Gong-e kh'āb dideh*, 301.

In his description of the film, Makhmalbaf argues that perfectionism in man's behavior depends on similarly perfect conditions, and he quotes a famous couplet from Hāfez: "If the Holy Spirit casts His blessings once again/Others too will do as Christ did."⁷⁸ This relationship between fate and circumstance on one hand and legal and ethical conditions on the other is mediated through the character of the judge. Makhmalbaf suggests that the presence of the judge confirms the film as a philosophical endeavor.⁷⁹ More generally, the judge's role in the film imbues its mysticism with political element as well, because within the context of the Iranian legal system, which is based on religious law and carried out in an Islamic republic, issues of and judgments in morality always assume a political dimension.

The judge plays an interesting role in the film as the only character who is aware of – or at least acknowledges – the film's episodic structure. In the third section, he laments the repetition of similar but contradictory events in the first two parts and resigns from his post. As Makhmalbaf notes, in the first two episodes the judge too willingly conforms to social norms and acts in a manner too "expedient." The director describes his role as "judicial."⁸⁰ However, in the film's third episode, the judge reflects on these expedient and judicial rulings and asks, "How could I have condemned individuals whose preordained conditions are far more effective on their actions than their personal share?" He continues by emphasizing his desire to empathize, an act that cannot be carried out in

⁷⁸ Makhmalbaf, *Gong-e kh^vāb dideh*, 305.

⁷⁹ Makhmalbaf, *Gong-e kh^vāb dideh*, 303.

⁸⁰ Makhmalbaf, *Gong-e kh^vāb dideh*, 304.

the present legal system: “I carefully thought of each convict and without a doubt if I had been in their exact situation, I would have behaved exactly as they did.” Issues of morality and the human ability to arbitrate them accurately become for both the judge and viewer increasingly muddled once the film introduces multiple variables and dimensions into the equation.

The judge more clearly delineates the role of condition in one’s ability to empathize as he defends his resignation. He says, “Whenever I contemplate the grave consequences of a criminal’s actions, I condemn him at once, but when I consider the specific reasons underlying the crime, I see him as acquitted.” The judge’s recognition of the film’s structure, which increasingly makes space for the recognition of incident and stipulation, ultimately leads to his advocacy of it. The judge’s position calls into question man’s ability to render proper judgment and make true decisions. The film reveals man’s access to truth as conditional, multiple, and variable, and at the same time it demonstrates that by appreciating the conditions that breed a particular situation and thereby approximating a truer truth, man falls whim to empathetic and sympathetic pulls, which alter his ability to judge the situation at hand.

Makhmalbaf suggests that the film’s first two episodes are intended to demonstrate the predestination of one’s actions, and the final episode advocates for the “relative role of man’s freedom.”⁸¹ And it is with this freedom to sympathize and act accordingly that the film ends and an unfinished fourth episode begins as the viewer is

⁸¹ Makhmalbaf, *Gong-e khvāb dideh*, 303.

once again confronted with the image of Güzel standing in front of a house and a train passing by. The unfinished and cyclical nature of *Time for Love* adds to its mystic texture by creating within this representational space a place for the interrogation of multiple truths, the literal and metaphoric powers of love, the relationship between fate and circumstance, and man's ability to know God.

The classification of *Time for Love* as a mystic text might initially strike the reader as problematic. The film's three cycles each depend on suicide or the viewer's knowledge of Güzel's suicide in previous sections, and Sufism, as an ascetic movement within Islam, disavows suicide. How can a film that is sympathetic to suicide fall within the ranks of Islamic mysticism? The answer to this question rests within the notion of '*erfān*', which was defined at the beginning of this chapter. '*Erfān*' as an intellectual movement in twentieth-century Iran stresses the mystical and philosophical elements of Sufism rather than the rules and regulations that govern that lifestyle. Suicide is permissible within the realm of '*erfāni*' mysticism because it underscores the philosophical debates that Makhmalbaf mentions in his notes. As we shall see in Chapter 4 of this study, suicide is a regular feature of the reformist genre, because it creates tension between the role of man's freedom and the laws that help form the foundation of Islam. This tension, as Chapter 4 demonstrates, acts as a productive site for the reconfigurations and reformations of the Islamic Republic's ideology in such a way that the tenets of Islam might exist harmoniously with the twentieth- and twenty-first-century ideals of democracy and civil society.

Making Mystic Meaning: The Revival of Mysticism

A number of other films in the late 1980s and early 1990s similarly drew on the mystic tradition, including Abbas Kiarostami's internationally successful Koker Trilogy: *Khāneh-ye dust kojāst?* [Where is Friend's House?] (1987), *Zendegi va digar hich* [Life and Nothing More] (1992), and *Zir-e darakhtān-e zeytun* [Through the Olive Trees] (1994). However, Dariush Mehrjui's *Hāmun* [Hamun] (1990) best captures and theorizes the rise of mysticism among Iranian intellectuals at this time. *Hāmun* premiered at the Fajr Film Festival the year before *Time for Love* and was identified in 1997 by *Film* as the best Iranian film, dethroning Mehrjui's 1969 classic *Gāv* [The Cow] of that title. The film is a psychological drama, which comprises a series of scenes that alternate between dream and reality, fantasy and life. The film's title character, Hamid Hamun, is an intellectual figure, who has been struggling for years to finish his doctoral thesis on love and faith. In the meantime, he has taken on a job in the corporate world in sales in order to support his family, especially his wife Mahsid, who is accustomed to a more comfortable lifestyle.

His life begins to crumble when Mahsid demands a divorce and takes custody of their only child, and the film examines Hamun's mental state by navigating the psychological terrain of memory on the one hand and anxiety on the other. In addition to the narrative that takes place in the present, *Hāmun* features a number of flashbacks that go as far back as the protagonist's childhood but primarily chart the course and collapse of his marriage to Mahsid. The main narrative is also fragmented by a number of Fellini-

style dream and fantasy sequences that express Hamun's anxiety about losing his wife, family, and ultimately control over his life. These scenes, which approach the absurd, capture the breakdown of the character's psychological wellbeing and function as wild alternatives to the stagnation of his own existence.

The film revolves around the decay of Hamun's power as both a man and an intellectual, two identifiers that are, for the protagonist, tightly woven together. Before the complete eruption of his marriage, Hamun brings Mahsid to a psychiatrist in a desperate attempt to cure her of her inability to love him. However, Hamun seems just as interested in availing himself of the doctor's services, cornering the psychiatrist on his way to the bathroom. Hamun reveals his state to the doctor, mixing metaphors—"sinking" on the one hand and "suspended" on the other—to create the impression of being completely stuck, but the psychiatrist matter-of-factly declares Hamun's state "unexceptional." This diagnosis allows Hamun's situation to represent a larger set of concerns in Iranian society, to mirror the stories of others who are "forty and suspended." Hamun responds to this evaluation by versifying the circumstances of his generation in one of the film's most famous lines: *Mā āvikht 'hā beh kojā-ye in shab-e tire biyāvizim/qabā-ye zhendeh-o-kapak zadeh-ye kh^vodemun ro?* [Where in this dark night should we who are hanging (i.e. suspended) hang/our tattered and rotten frock?].

That this stagnation is Hamun's pro-filmic starting point is significant insofar as it serves as a base from which the film's narrative visually constructs his further disempowerment. *Hāmun* is significant in part because it is one of the first films after the

Revolution to depict a man, and especially an intellectual man, in a weakened state in a non-redemptive way. The previous wave of films attempted to commit the viewer first to the Revolution and the Islamic Republic and later the Iran-Iraq War, tasks that required a strong male figure. Hamun is in many ways the quintessential Iranian intellectual hero: wrought with brooding “anguish and tortured self-examination” at the same time that he is “a man of great physical vitality and charm.”⁸² However, *Hāmun* renders its protagonist socially, emotionally, and physically weak at various points in its narrative.

At one point in the film, Hamun is enraged by his wife’s plans to divorce him, and he confronts her violently as she is hanging laundry on the roof of their apartment building. Their neighbors have to come and separate them. As Hamid Reza Sadr notes, these violent moments in the film were the first time that a man and a woman touched on screen in post-Revolution cinema.⁸³ However, far from being sexualized, this moment reveals Hamun as uncontrolled and unraveling. The film visually reinforces this conclusion with a flood of neighbors who take over the frame with scorn and condemnation.

At other points in the film, Hamun is reduced to child-like tears, ashamed of his own actions and heartbroken by his wife’s. The breakdown of his physical prowess occurs as he unsuccessfully tries to complete the sale of medical equipment. The doctor in charge rejects the initial offer, so Hamun decides to stage a demonstration. He attempts to supply the necessary sample of blood himself and inadvertently passes out because he

⁸² Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London and New York: I.B. Taurius, 2006), 254.

⁸³ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 254.

has drained too much. This scene in the film is the ultimate metaphor for the collapse of the intellectual man in post-Revolution Iran; he is literally dried up and unconscious.

Hamun attempts throughout the film to ground his life through a series of mystical journeys. Specifically, he goes in search of ‘Ali, his *ostād* or spiritual guide, who has achieved Sufi unity despite the tragic loss of his family. Hamun likens him to Hallāj, a great mystic figure, and explains, “you leapt into the silver pond and reached yourself and God.”⁸⁴ Hamun yearns for this spiritual unity and he believes that he can only achieve it by uniting with ‘Ali. In this way the spiritual guide becomes a kind of beloved figure. However, typical of a mystical journey, Hamun never reaches his destination and never finds that for which he is searching. He travels from Tehran to ‘Ali’s village only to discover that ‘Ali is in Tehran. Later Hamun passes ‘Ali in a car, which leads to a frantic car chase that ends in Hamun colliding with another car. This scene demonstrates how the closer one gets to the beloved the farther he actually is. Even though Hamun sees ‘Ali in the next car, his crash ultimately causes his life to spin out of control even more, undermining his search for stability. This theme is picked up again by the film’s ending. Hamun tries to drown himself but he is rescued by ‘Ali. It is only in this momentary death that he can be reunited with his beloved figure.

⁸⁴ This statement follows several lines from Ahmad Shamlu’s famous modernist poem “Pariā” [Fairies]: “Fire! Fire! So Pretty! Wow!/And it’s almost sunset now/Jumping up and jumping down/Jumping into the silver pond.” Hamun references Shamlu’s poetry several times throughout the film. As Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak has noted, Shamlu had mystical tendencies himself, particularly in the poem “Dar in bon bast” [In this Dead End], in which the perfect Revolution is presented as a kind of beloved, dreamt and fantasized, but never realized. Shamlu’s poetry is also significant to the film because Hamun thesis topic, the love and faith of Abraham—a exploration into mysticism in its own right—is also the subject of one of Shamlu’s famous poems “Sorud-e Abrāhim dar ātesh” [The Song of Abraham in the Fire]. More generally, Shamlu was the archetypal poet, the very kind of intellectual figure that the film critiques.

One of the film's flashbacks returns Hamun to his childhood during *'āshurā*, the Shi'i mourning ceremony for the martyrdom of Hussein. Six-year-old Hamun navigates the rituals of self-flagellation in search of 'Ali 'Abedini.⁸⁵ He eventually finds 'Ali, who appears to be the same age as he is during the film's present, thirty-five years later. 'Ali's agelessness captures the timelessness of this mystic journey. At the same time, Hamun's search represents an alternative to the communal religion represented by the mourning ceremonies.

It is the possibility of this alternative that allows us to return to mysticism as a historically grounded event in post-Revolution Iran. The film *Hāmun* theorizes how those intellectuals who felt disempowered and stagnant found purpose and meaning in mysticism, as an alternative to the religion being promoted by the Islamic Republic. The early 1990s represented a unique period in Iran's history, shaped by the death of Khomeini, the end of the Iran-Iraq War, and the gradual abatement of revolutionary fervor. After a decade of excitement and movement, the late 1980s and early 1990s represented a political and intellectual lull. While the extreme circumstances of the Revolution and the War were no longer in place, the corresponding policies, which limited economic, social, and political mobility, left many intellectuals feeling trapped, and mysticism represented the possibility of redemption.

⁸⁵ Hāmun's use of 'Ali's surname crucially distinguishes him from 'Ali, the rightful successor of Mohammad according to Shi'i belief and the father of Hussein. Without this reference to his last name, Hāmun's question "Have you seen 'Ali?" might be misinterpreted in the context of the *'āshurā* ceremonies.

The turn to mysticism represented in *Time for Love* and *Hāmun* allows us to rethink the implications of cine-mysticism in Iran, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The appropriation of a mystic aesthetic at this juncture in Iran's history represents a point of concern for critics like Hamid Dabashi, who sees cine-mysticism as a "sad and rather pathetic outcome of the dispirited Iranian bourgeoisie's loss of confidence" in the Revolutionary project.⁸⁶ He classifies this effort in Iranian cinema as "strange flirtation witha belated attraction to a bourgeois version of Persian mysticism."⁸⁷ Dabashi laments that "To see that mise-en-scène of abject resignation sublated into attempts at literary and visual art is positively hideous."⁸⁸ Referring specifically to Makhmalbaf's experiments in the mystic realm, he describes the director's efforts as "debilitating" and accuses them of navigating the "dominant political culture further into a frenzy of self-mortification and abstraction."⁸⁹

Dabashi describes cine-mysticism as a "disease" and potentially "fatal,"⁹⁰ and the moment of redemption for Makhmalbaf occurs when he recovers from this illness. Dabashi finds value in Makhmalbaf's mysticism, which he describes as "ghastly," only through the idea that this brush with cinematic death ultimately strengthened his later films. Although Dabashi does not explicitly refer to Derrida, his description of Makhmalbaf's early films as both the illness and the disease recalls "Plato's Pharmacy,"

⁸⁶ Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 29.

⁸⁷ Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 29.

⁸⁸ Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 29.

⁸⁹ Hamid Dabashi, "Dead Certainties: The Early Makhmalbaf," *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 133.

⁹⁰ Dabashi, "Dead Certainties," 134-135.

in which Derrida argues that writing is both a poison and a remedy. However, while Derrida sees the space created by the collapse of this binary as wrought with potential and productivity, Dabashi considers it a barrier which must be overcome, which he calls the “decisive moment,” and thereby establishes a new limiting binary between Makhmalbaf’s early films and his later films.⁹¹

However, Dabashi’s analysis neglects the possibility that mysticism functioned for Makhmalbaf as a strategic effort to claim his own creativity, and by reducing this mystic aesthetic to bourgeois dabbling and brushing it aside, Dabashi misses the productivity that comes with considering cine-mysticism within its historical context. Indeed, his studies of Makhmalbaf represent an effort to recuperative “a creative restoration of historical agency in the post/colonial subject,”⁹² which he locates in the director’s later films. As a result, he analyzes the director’s earlier works through the lens of his later films: death avoided, illness overcome. However, this narrow observation fails to acknowledge meaningful possibilities of mysticism both within the context of Makhmalbaf’s career and Iranian cinema more generally. The value of mysticism in films like *Time for Love* extends well beyond an “ideological exorcism.” This cine-mysticism resonated with other intellectual efforts, which also drew on the mystic tradition, and together foresaw the coming of Khatami’s Reformist Movement less than a decade later.

⁹¹See Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (New York and London: Continuum Books, 2004), 67-154.

⁹² Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 20.

The philosophical contributions of Abdolkarim Soroush are a particularly salient point of departure for this kind of argument, because the film *Time for Love* clearly appealed to his philosophical, aesthetic, and political sensibilities. By identifying the mysticism implicit in his philosophies and by reading these works against *Time for Love*, it is possible to position mysticism (in both its cinematic and philosophical manifestations) as a politically potent strategy that resonated with imminent revolutionary discontent and an emerging set of reformist concerns. Soroush credits Rumi with introducing him to a “love-based mysticism” that is at odds with and ultimately saved him from the fear-based mysticism of Al-Ghazali. Historian Afshin Matin-asgari notes that Soroush’s philosophies feature a “strong mystical tendency” that draws from and is structured around references to Rumi and his poetry. Matin-asgari further argues that a “deep and unresolved tension” exists between this mystic tendency and his attraction to philosophical reason.⁹³ The incongruities between these two modes of thought inevitably result in contradictions in Soroush’s writings; nevertheless in the 1990s he maintained that his understanding of morality appeals to “a mystical esthetics of divine beauty,” and in a 1992 lecture he argued that mysticism is the “only path” out of the post-modern condition because it “doubted rationality from the onset.”⁹⁴

By the mid-1990s, Soroush’s espousal of mysticism was replaced by a call for the rationality of science. Matin-asgari cites an important lecture that Soroush gave in 1996

⁹³ Afshin Matin-asgari, “Abdolkarim Soroush and the Secularization of Islamic Thought in Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 30, nos.1-2 (Winter/Spring 1997), 102.

⁹⁴ Matin-asgari, “Abdolkarim Soroush and the Secularization of Islamic Thought in Iran,” 103.

on “Iranian identity,” in which he claimed that mysticism fosters “fatalistic thinking (*jabr-andishi*) and perplexity (*hayrat*)” within Iranian society. As a solution, he advocated the rational and critical philosophy of Kant. It is within this move towards rationalism and away from nihilism that Matin-asgari locates Soroush’s contribution to the secularization of Islamic thought.⁹⁵ Matin-asgari’s useful delineation of the development of Soroush’s philosophy brings to focus an important aspect to the study of this important figure. Soroush’s philosophy comprises an expansive and expanding body of works, and each of his beliefs is grounded in a particular historical moment. To ignore that historicity is to violate the very nature of his philosophy. Therefore, I intend to focus on *Qabz va bast-e te’urik-e shari’at: nazariyeh-ye takāmol-e ma’refat-e dini* [The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religious Law: The Concept of the Evolution of Religious Knowledge] (1990), a book published from a four-part series of articles that the author wrote between May 1988 and March 1990. The same historical circumstances from which Makhmalbaf’s *Time for Love* emerged also gave rise to the ideas and beliefs presented in this book. By reading these two cultural products side by side, I shall demonstrate that mysticism represented a broad trend among the country’s intellectuals in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and this mystic project corresponded both temporally and ideologically with a nascent but budding reformist discourse.

Soroush’s choice of title, *The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religious Law*, immediately signals the book’s mystic tones. In the original Persian, the first two

⁹⁵ Matin-asgari, “Abdolkarim Soroush and the Secularization of Islamic Thought in Iran,” 103.

words, *qabz* [contraction] and *bast* [expansion], signify two Sufi concepts that describe the movement of a mystic's heart: the literal tightening and loosening of the muscle and the corresponding symbolic desolation and elation. In *The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religious Law*, Soroush appropriates these terms to describe "altering moments of epistemic openness and closure of Islamic societies"⁹⁶ to generate a mystic-based model that he hopes will fill an epistemological and theoretical gap in the efforts by Islamic reformists and revivalists.⁹⁷ In its most basic form, the theory of contraction and expansion aims to distinguish "religion and people's understanding of it," wherein "That which remains constant is religion [*din*]" and "that which undergoes change is religious knowledge and insight [*ma'refat-e dini*]."⁹⁸ While religion itself represents perfection, human understanding of religion, or religious knowledge, is wrought with imperfection as a product of the human experience. We can only gain access to religion through interpretation, a human science, and as Soroush notes, "defects abound in exegeses."⁹⁹ The role of reason in this theory is to acknowledge the distinction between religion and religious understanding. Reason, Soroush maintains, does not "complement" religion; "it struggles to improve its own understanding of religion."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ John Cooper, "Abd al-Karim Soroush," *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, eds. John Cooper, Ronald L. Nettler, and Mohamed Mahmoud (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), 43.

⁹⁷ Abdolkarim Soroush, "Islamic Revival and Reform: Theological Approaches," *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*, eds. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 30.

⁹⁸ Abdolkarim Soroush, "Islamic Revival and Reform: Theological Approaches," 31.

⁹⁹ Abdolkarim Soroush, "Islamic Revival and Reform: Theological Approaches," 31.

¹⁰⁰ Abdolkarim Soroush, "Islamic Revival and Reform: Theological Approaches," 31.

Soroush describes religion as “unblemished by the artifacts of the human mind,”¹⁰¹ and this description captures the temporality of religious knowledge, which is weighed down by the historical *artifacts* of the human mind. He goes so far as to state that the degree of the temporality of religious knowledge approaches “the synchronization and adaptation of this branch of human knowledge with the sciences and needs of each age.”¹⁰² The nature of religious knowledge may, thereby, more closely approximate historically the contours of human knowledge than true meaning of religion. Soroush is able as a result of this supposition to reconcile a tension he detects between eternity and temporality, and by extension he renders moot debates about tradition and modernity in the Islamic world.¹⁰³ Ultimately the separation he maintains between religion and religious knowledge brings to mind the distance in Sufi poetry between lover and beloved and the divine implications of this mystic love. As Ashkan Dahlén notes, this theory “is connected to mysticism in that it renders meaning to the traditional distinction between *shari’at*, *tariqat* (the esoteric way), and *haqiqat*,” and this distinction is “grounded in the eternal differences of hermeneutical methodology.”¹⁰⁴

The critique of absolutism that surfaces in Soroush’s approach in *The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religious Law* echoes the mysticism put forth by Makhmalbaf in *Time for Love*. Although Soroush and Makhmalbaf interrogate slightly

¹⁰¹ Abdolkarim Soroush, “Islamic Revival and Reform: Theological Approaches,” 31.

¹⁰² Abdolkarim Soroush, “Islamic Revival and Reform: Theological Approaches,” 32.

¹⁰³ Abdolkarim Soroush, “Islamic Revival and Reform: Theological Approaches,” 34.

¹⁰⁴ Ashkan P. Dahlén, *Islamic Law, Epistemology and Modernity: Legal Philosophy in Contemporary Iran* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 255.

different terminologies, both are interested in human access to a definite, and presumably religious, truth. These models suggest the relativity of that access. Makhmalbaf's film suggests that the perfect judgment, that is, a judgment that corresponds precisely with religious truth, depends on the perfect conditions. Soroush's argument helps refine this idea as it is presented in *Time for Love*. That religious knowledge of truth is necessarily grounded in and conditioned by the trends in the historical trends of flawed human thought, which in turn shapes the mechanisms that govern societies, is significant here insofar as it suggests the impossibility of perfectionism within the human condition. In both Soroush's philosophy and Makhmalbaf's *Time for Love* this rejection of absolutism opens the door to a pluralism that accepts the possibility of multiple paths to a universal truth. In *Time for Love* this pluralism takes the form of moral relativism and is represented by the film's structure, which features a number of moral paths without imposing a privileging system on any of them. For Soroush, the resolute denial of absolutism clears the way for plurality of the religious community, which is a "shallow indicator of the plurality of souls,"¹⁰⁵ and he uses this indicator to call for tolerance.

Soroush's philosophies also enable us to envision the political possibilities latent in mysticism in contemporary Iran, including the kind represented in *Time for Love*. Although Soroush examines the religious and mystical nature of an Islamic hermeneutic process, the political implications of his argument are undeniable. The very call for

¹⁰⁵ Abdolkarim Soroush, "Tolerance and Governance: A Discourse on Religion and Democracy," *Reason, Freedom & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 145.

pluralism implicit in Soroush's discussion threatens the existence of the Islamic Republic, which depends on *velāyat-e faqih* [guardianship of the Islamic jurist], a ruling system that privileges and enforces a single religious understanding under the guise of religion itself.¹⁰⁶ Soroush's use of mysticism to discredit the system of *velāyat-e faqih* is significant because Khomeini's construction of the concept drew on mystic thought.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, Soroush used Khomeini's own scholarly tools to refute his most important political and intellectual contribution to Iranian society. Moreover, the application of Soroush's ideas to political reform is paramount. As Oliver Roy argues, he provided "the 'political philosophy' of the Khatamists" by considering "how to secularize politics in a society which cannot afford to reject its heritage and origin: an Islamic Revolution."¹⁰⁸

While Roy's assessment, written in 1999, grounds Soroush and mysticism in the present (i.e. Khatami's presidency), Mangol Bayat's study *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* allows us to see a historical trajectory of Iranian intellectualism that drew heavily from the mystic tradition. In particular, Bayat traces the genealogy of dissent in Iranian social and religious thought, and she demonstrates that the Sufis of the seventeenth century produced an intellectual model for dissent that would

¹⁰⁶ Soroush's challenge of the political system has resulted in serious backlash. Soroush was initially a close ally of Khomeini and served on the Culture Revolution Institute, an organization whose seven members were handpicked by Khomeini to restructure higher education curricula to favor a more Islamic orientation. However, in the 1990s, he became increasingly critical of the clergy and their role in politics, falling out of favor with the government. Since 2000 he has lived in exile in the United States.

¹⁰⁷ For more, see Daniel Brumberg, "Ascetic Mysticism and the Roots of Khomeini's Charisma," *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 39-54.

¹⁰⁸ Oliver Roy, "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran," *Middle East Journal* 87, no. 2 (Spring 1999), 215.

inform the social and political restlessness of the nineteenth century and later the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) and the Islamic Revolution (1978-1979). Bayat considers, for example, Mulla Sadra (1572-1641), who appropriated Sufi terminology to fight against the dominant jurisdiction at the time, which forbade individual and esoteric access to certain kinds of religious knowledge. As Bayat notes, Sadr argued that “True knowledge...is neither jurisprudence, nor philology, nor grammar, nor medicine; for all are nothing but the external garbs of the Koranic science,”¹⁰⁹ and this belief certainly foreshadowed Soroush’s distinction between religion and religious knowledge.

This historical resonance positions mysticism within a political framework at the time that Makhmalbaf released *Time for Love*. Since Bayat proves the historical significance of mysticism to dissident thought, which has functioned as a dominant political mode in modern Iran, one can argue that mysticism has been epistemologically wrought with political meaning. Therefore, Makhmalbaf’s appropriation of mysticism in *Time for Love* is necessarily political. The film, through its critique of absolutism and its promotion of moral relativity, gently challenges the status quo in the Iranian political system by creating a complicated space for the many complications and possibilities that arise from modes of human moral judgment. As such, at the same time that *Time for Love* marked a new phase in the careers of Makhmalbaf and, it also signaled a revival of the political appropriation of mysticism. The film traces a new contour in this mystic-political trajectory; it moves away from resistance and towards the ideals of humanism.

¹⁰⁹ Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 29.

Conclusion

The politicalization of Soroush's philosophies and their resonance with Makhmalbaf's *Time for Love* demonstrate that mysticism, far from just representing a desire to escape the Islamic Republic's interpretation of Islam, also functioned in the early 1990s as a deliberate strategy for the enactment of political and social reform. Both Soroush and Makhmalbaf used mysticism to stress the importance of considering temporality in matters of governance and jurisprudence. Their emphasis on context represented an important step on the part of reformists to locate the Islamic Revolution as a historically grounded event, rigid but necessitated by a certain set of extreme circumstances, rather than as ongoing and ahistorical process. As such, reform, and later the Reformist Movement, became a means of reconciling a glorified history with the need to move beyond the closed policies that Khomeini and his revolution enacted.

This emphasis on temporality allows us to return to Khatami, who similarly stressed the importance of historical circumstances in the creation of policy. In both his reactions to *Time for Love* and later in his letter of resignation, Khatami suggested that the laws governing the regulation of the art were no longer the product of current circumstances. In a sense, he acted upon the film's call for a consideration of circumstance and attempted to alter and expand possibility and permissibility, first from the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance and later in his bid for president.

Chapter Three

Documenting Election and the Urban Reality of Reform

In an interview with *Sight and Sound*, director Rakhshan Bani-E'temad notes, "I am sure that if Mohammad Khatami hadn't been elected, this film [*May Lady* (1999)] would never have made it onto the screen."¹ With this statement, she suggests an increasingly permissive relationship between the Reformist Movement and Iranian cinema, wherein the latter benefits from the former's liberal cultural policies. However, Bani-E'temad's observation does not alone accommodate the complexity of the interactions between these two institutions. Khatami's election denoted more than just a new, more liberal approach to cultural policy; it also marked the Reformist Movement's entrance onto the big screen. During Khatami's presidency, the Reformist Movement allowed cinema to push thematic boundaries and the limits of representation, and at the same time it became a major character *within* films.

This chapter investigates the dynamics of this overlapping relationship by considering two films by Rakhshan Bani-E'temad: *Zir-e pust-e shahr* [Under the Skin of the City] (2001), a feature film that takes place during the 1997 elections, and *Ruzegār-e mā...* [Our Times...] (2002), a documentary about the 2001 elections. More specifically, this chapter charts Bani-E'temad's ambivalence towards the Reformist Movement by

¹ Hadani Ditmars, "Rakshan Bani-Etemād talks to Hadani Ditmars about bending the rules in 'May Lady.'" *Sight and Sound* 20 (1999), 20.

analyzing her portrayal of urbanism and her interrogation of the documentary form. The films together indicate that the harsh realities of life in the city create the need for political hope but at the same time block attempts to satisfy it. By examining Bani-E'temad's cinematic relationship with the city of Tehran, I demonstrate the director's critique of the Reformist Movement, which focused on repairing Iran's global reputation rather than addressing its local problems.²

Under the Skin of the City and *Our Times*... are well-suited to an investigation of the ideological interactions between cinema and the Reformist Movement, because both films depict Mohammad Khatami at important electoral moments. During these elections, the Reformist Movement outlined its political platform and employed a heightened political discourse. These acts opened public debates that demanded clarification and accountability. Rakhshan Bani-E'temad's films participate in these debates at the same time that they contribute to the promotion and mystification of the Reformist Movement by representing it within a cinematic space. The city of Tehran plays a prominent role in both films and this chapter demonstrates that in order to understand fully the films' commentary on the Reformist Movement, one must conceptualize Bani-E'temad's portrayal of urbanism and her appropriation of the documentary form, two modes of representation that, within the history of Iranian cinema, have perceived their relationship to the "real" as intimate and urgent.

² For more on Khatami's inability to create change, see Farzin Vahdat, "Religious Modernity in Iran: Dilemmas of Islamic Democracy in the Discourses of Mohammad Khatami," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 25 no. 3 (2005).

The development of Rakhshan Bani-E'temad's career parallels the emergence of Iran's post-Revolution cinematic tradition. She studied directing at the College of Dramatic Arts in Tehran and graduated in 1979, immediately before the Revolution's purification process closed down many of the country's universities. She thereafter designed sets, directed documentaries for television, and served as an assistant director for several feature films.³ In 1988 she released her first full-length feature film, *Khārej az mahnadeh* [Off Limits], just as post-Revolution Iranian cinema was coming into its own and gaining international recognition. Since then she has become Iran's most prominent female director, both locally and globally, winning prizes at the Fajr (Tehran), Locarno, Montreal, Moscow, and Torino film festivals. Despite Bani-E'temad's insistence that she be classified as neither a female nor feminist filmmaker,⁴ the existing scholarship on her work focuses almost exclusively on her role as a female director and her representation of women.⁵ However, she has a body of work that indicates a distinctly urban style. The city of Tehran functions as both the setting and a complicated character in all of her films. By examining two of these metropolitan narratives, I shall move away from a strictly feminist reading and theorize her urban aesthetic.

³ Naghmeh Samini, "Yek sili-ye khoshāhang" [Rakhshan Bani-E'temād at a Glance] *Film* 19.263 (2001), 131-132.

⁴ Rakhshan Bani-E'temād "Ghamkhār-e bi edde'ā-ye zanān-e darmānde: goftogu bā Rakhshān-e Bani-E'temād" [Sympathy without the pretense of distressed women: a conversation with Rakhshan Bani-E'temād] *Zanān* [Women] 25 (Mordād/Shahrivār 1374/1995), 44.

⁵ See, for example, Hamid Naficy, "Veiled Voice and Vision in Iranian Cinema: The Evolution of Rakhshan Banietemad's Films," *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in the Film at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Murray Pomerance (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001). Naficy seeks to chart the increasing presence of women in post-Revolution cinema, position Bani-E'temad's films into the trajectory, and examine the ways in which the director confronts or conforms to certain policies regulating on-screen modesty.

Under the Skin of the City and *Our Times...* together suggest that Bani-E'temad's cinematic city depends on three filmic features. The director employs a fusion of documentary and narrative styles that complicate the viewer's understanding of representation and reality. She plots economic and class difference geographically on Tehran's north-south axis to suggest a multiplicity of urban experiences. Finally, both films depict housing crises in the south of Tehran and locate architectural experiences as nodal points through which other economic and class struggles are mediated. As this chapter will demonstrate, Bani-E'temad's urban aesthetic emerged as the style best suited to represent, promote, and criticize the Reformist Movement during the critical elections in 1997 and 2001. My analysis of Bani-E'temad's representation of these two elections and my delineation of the resulting urban aesthetic begin with a study of the role of documentary and urbanism in *Under the Skin of the City* (2001) and concludes with a discussion of Bani-E'temad's bid to reset a traditional documentary time in *Our Times...* (2002).

Under the Skin of the City opened in 2001 to wide critical and popular acclaim and won the award for best director at both the fourth annual Cinema House Festival and the second annual Social Films Festival. It was also the first film by Bani-E'temad to be distributed in the United States.⁶ *Under the Skin of the City*, which takes place during the 1997 presidential elections, tells the story of a house and family, whose members each try to carve out a meaningful existence for themselves in an unfair and unforgiving urban

⁶ Raul Hamid, "Review: Under the Skin of the City," *Cineaste* 51(2003), 50.

landscape. Tuba provides her family with its main source of income as a factory worker and finds comfort in the stability of homeownership. Her husband, Mahmud, once a political activist, is injured and unable to work but attempts to assert control by plotting to sell the family home to a builder who is buying all of the neighboring houses. Mahmud is encouraged by their eldest son, ‘Abbas, who works as a delivery boy and who must, therefore, navigate the various districts of the city. He needs the money from the house to process travel documents so he can fulfill his dream of going to Japan to earn money.

‘Ali, the younger brother and a promising student, who is teaching his mother to read, has abandoned his own studies to participate in campaigning efforts much to the dismay of his family members, who hope that he can save them from financial hardship by going to college. The youngest child, Mahbubeh, pursues a close friendship with her neighbor Masumeh, whose drug-addict brother beats her regularly. Tuba’s second daughter, Hamideh, is also a victim of domestic abuse. Married to an abusive husband, she has one child and is pregnant with another; she regularly returns to her family’s home to escape the abuse.

The narrative comes to a head when Mahmud and ‘Abbas sell the house, but the travel agency processing ‘Abbas’ paperwork disappears with his money. In a desperate effort to recover the money, he agrees to an underground job delivering drugs. However, ‘Ali foils his efforts by secretly dumping the merchandise during the long drive outside the city. Meanwhile, Masumeh has fled her abusive brother, abandoning Mahbubeh and joining a gang of homeless youth. ‘Abbas, unable to account for the missing goods, must

also flee, and the film ends on Election Day with Tuba's announcement that she has lost everything. However, at the same time, she describes her reasons for voting and therein articulates a hope for change that remains with the viewer long after the film's images have left the screen. This moment in the film, in which Tuba mediates her personal desires through the electoral system, signals Bani-E'temad's commitment to social commentary. Tuba makes a connection between her own situation and her country's circumstances. The parallel that she draws between herself and the collective brings to focus the fact that *Under Skin of the City*'s social concern is greater than just one woman or one family.

Documentary and Commitment, Reality and Representation

In an interview with Massoud Mehrabi, Rakhshan Bani-E'temad described the relationship between film and reality by suggesting that cinema is a system within Iranian society that is "duty-bound to attend to reality."⁷ She attributed this level of commitment to the shared experiences of her generation of filmmakers who began working and flourishing under the dire conditions of first a revolution and later an eight-year war. Bani-E'temad aptly identifies a trend in Iranian New Wave Cinema, in which filmmakers reveal a sense of obligation to reality and at the same time interrogate the ways in which film represents it. Many of Bani-E'temad's contemporaries achieve this dual purpose by

⁷ Massoud Mehrabi, "Commitment, Cinema, Construction: An Interview with Rakshan Bani-E'temād," *Film International* 13.52-53 (2007), 83.

appropriating a neorealist style⁸ that calls forth the mid-century Italian tradition by the same name and draws on the related French *cinéma vérité* movement. The Iranian revival of Italian neorealism is historically justified by similarities between the political and physical condition of postwar Italy and the economic and structural damage to Iran both during and after the Iran-Iraq war. ‘Abbas Kiarostami has further indicated that Italian neorealism revealed to him the power of film to represent the “real” and “ordinary” experiences in a way that Hollywood cinema never could.⁹

Scholars have aesthetically likened Iranian New Wave Cinema to its Italian and French antecedents in a number of ways. Stephen Weinberger identifies in films by Kiarostami, Majidi, and Makhmalbaf a number of neorealist trends, including the use of non-actors, shots on location that often highlight rural poverty or urban destruction, and an interest in the working-class experience.¹⁰ Chaudhuri and Finn (2003) describe what they call the “open image” or “a certain type of ambiguous, epiphanic image” in films by Bahman Ghobadi, Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Samira Makhmalbaf, and Jafar Panahi. They argue that the “open image” is a means of connecting Iranian post-Revolution cinema to Italian postwar neorealism, because it functions as an apolitical

⁸ Although the term “neorealist” is contested when applied to Iranian cinema because it clearly references Italian neorealism without providing sufficient credit to the Iranian poetic and cinematic traditions present in these films, Chaudhuri and Finn, Weinberger, and other scholars have made a compelling argument for its applicability in this case. I appropriate its usage because it conjures up a fitting set of expectations regarding this style; nevertheless, I acknowledge the category’s shortcomings.

⁹ Philip Lopate, “Interview with Abbas Kiarostami,” *Totally, Tenderly, Tragically* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1998), 352-353.

¹⁰ Stephen Weinberger, “Neorealism, Iranian Style,” *Iranian Studies* no. 40, vol. 1 (2007), 5-16.

aesthetic symptom of political repression in both cases.¹¹ Hamid Naficy notes that in *Nemā-ye nazdik* [Close-up] (1989), Kiarostami exploits a *cinema vérité* style to “investigate and question reality by intervening in it or provoking it.”¹² In each instance, the scholarship references a hybrid fictional-documentary form that is constitutive of this Iranian neorealist style. This hybrid form is generated when the film’s camerawork appropriates a documentary purpose, and the filmmaker gathers visual evidence that becomes part of his or her narrative film.

Rakhshan Bani-E’tamad’s commitment to reality in *Under the Skin of the City* is significantly different than the style appropriated by Kiarostami and others. Bani-E’tamad’s film *is* invested in the documentary form, but it does not gather documentarian evidence or employ a *cinema vérité* style. Instead, Bani-E’tamad creates a fictional documentary crew in her film. The viewer hears the male director’s voice (which clearly does not belong to Bani-E’tamad) and sees the film crew’s equipment. Images of the crew’s “documentary” are mediated through the equipment’s various screens. For example, we see Tuba in the viewfinder and on video displays as she is being recorded by this fictional crew. These images are different than Kiarostami’s *Close-up*, where the film *is* the documentary. *Under the Skin of the City* has an additional layer of representation: the camera captures another camera capturing a documentary subject.

¹¹ Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn, “The Open Image: Poetic Realism and the New Iranian Cinema,” *Screen* 44 no.1 (Spring 2004), 38-57.

¹² Hamid Naficy, “Kiarostami’s *Close-Up*: Questioning Reality, Realism, and Neorealism,” *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader*, eds. Jeffrey Geiger and R. L. Rutsky (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005), 801.

Unlike Kiarostami, who “intervenes” in and “pokes” at reality, Bani-E’tamad fictionalizes documentary filmmaking. This technique invites the viewer to rethink his or her understanding of representation and reality, and specifically the ways in which film creates reality and viewers access it. The reconfiguration of representation and reality in *Under the Skin of the City* reveals the director’s critique of the Reformist Movement. The film trains the viewer to challenge the ways in which the Reformist Movement both has been represented and has represented itself. Bani-E’tamad creates a complex system, in which the documentary form is subverted in order call into question conceptions of the real and the reality of the Reformist Movement.

Bill Nichols has noted that the complexity of documentary arises from the fact that it represents rather than replicates reality.¹³ He argues that documentaries participate in “discourses of sobriety,” which are sobering because they envision their relationship “with the real as direct, immediate, transparent.”¹⁴ Despite documentary’s claim to reality, the nature of images and image-making undeniably necessitates a critical gap between object and representation that cannot be closed.¹⁵ *Under the Skin of the City*, a narrative film that introduces documentary filmmaking into a fictional realm, blurs and intervenes in the relationship between representation and reality, narrative and documentary. A clear delineation of the documentary and narrative forms proves

¹³ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 20.

¹⁴ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 14.

¹⁵ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 5.

instructive to an analysis of *Under the Skin of the City*, which invites the viewer to examine each of these two genres next to and within the other. By better identifying the relationship between these complex forces (representation and reality, narrative and documentary), one can more effectively assess Bani-E'temad's depiction of the 1997 elections, a historical event premised similarly on "discourses of sobriety."

Nichols, acknowledging the difficulties of fixing the meaning of a fluid term, offers a three-part definition of documentary that explores it from the perspective of the filmmaker, the text, and the viewer. Documentary filmmaking as an institutional practice constitutes a community of filmmakers bound together by a set of ethical standards and a shared interest in the historical world rather than by a willingness to relinquish control (over subjects, content, etc.).¹⁶ Bani-E'temad considers herself a part of such a community; a notion upon which I shall expand later. For now, my immediate concern is a discussion of documentary as text, the relationship to other texts, especially narrative films, and how its textual practices inform viewer expectations. Documentary and narrative film differ most significantly in the way that they accommodate and configure conceptions of space and time, and the designation between different modes of time and space is determined at the moment of evidentiary editing, when the film's continuity between and within scenes is established.

¹⁶ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 14-16.

Documentaries are generally organized around an “informing logic,” the “economy” of which determines an “argument about the historical world.”¹⁷ As a result, a documentary’s sounds and images function as evidence in the introduction, discussion, and possible solution of a problem of the “lived, historical world.” Jumps in time and space are tolerated by the viewer so long as they conform and contribute to the documentary’s overall argument-based structure. Narrative films, on the other hand, are typically driven by plots: the introduction of characters and the creation and resolution of conflict in an imaginary world (that may or may not resemble the lived, historical world). As such, continuity between disparate times and places is achieved through storyline references and editing techniques that create similarities between scenes and navigate the viewer’s gaze through various temporal and spatial domains. Therefore, while narrative fiction combines various spaces together in order to generate for the viewer the “impression of one continuous world that spills beyond the frame in every direction,” documentary films are more concerned with arranging different temporalities in order “to give the impression of one continuous argument.”¹⁸

Viewers, many of whom are adept consumers of visual media, have a conscious or unconscious awareness of these structural differences and use their understanding of genre to construct complementary sets of interpretative skills. In other words, viewers make sense of documentary and narrative films in different ways. Whereas viewers

¹⁷ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 18.

¹⁸ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 20.

formulate a story around the sounds and images of a narrative film, they participate in a documentary film by using its audio-visual material as evidence to construct an argument that they assume exists because their previous experience with documentaries tells them that the argument structure is the basic organizing principle in documentary filmmaking. As such, the “mode of engagement” for a narrative film involves recognition of fiction and a desire to believe it is true. Documentary film imbues within the viewer a similar tension, but “oscillation now swings between recognition of historical reality and the recognition of an argument about it.”¹⁹ What emerges from the friction created between these two viewing strategies is an *assumed* “indexical relationship” between the profilmic event and the historical world, wherein the former has “undergone little or no modification in order to be recorded on film and magnetic tape.”²⁰ It is ultimately through the viewer’s expectations that the documentary genre lays claim to the real. However, this claim is deceptively simple and the history of documentary within the Iranian cinematic tradition demonstrates the existence of a set of reflexive documentaries that problematize their own relationship to reality as a means of critiquing the social and historical worlds they index.

In Iran the tension between documentary and narrative film draws on the country’s early cinematic history, which was crucially shaped by documentary filmmaking. The origins of Iranian cinema can be traced to 1900, when Mozzafar al-Din

¹⁹ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 28.

²⁰ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 27.

Shah traveled to Europe and purchased a motion picture camera,²¹ and the first Iranian films were a series of scenes commissioned by Mozzafar al-Din, filmed by Mirza Ebrahim Khan ‘Akkasbashi, and intended for an audience of servants.²² These scenes, which might be considered the first Iranian documentaries, sought to record the official and unofficial lives of Mozzafar al-Din Shah’s court and included a mix of public and private moments. Later, the professionalization of documentary filmmaking occurred at the hands of Khan Baba Khan Mo’tazedi, who studied engineering in Paris and worked at the Gaumont film factory. He returned to Iran in 1925, after the fall of the Qajar Dynasty, and filmed *Majles-e mo’esesān* [The Founders’ Assembly]. In 1926 he filmed the twenty-minute *Rezā Shāh dar majles-e mo’esessān* [Reza Shah at the Founders’ Assembly].²³ He continued to make documentaries and to produce newsreels about the Shah’s public life. This early narrative of Iranian documentary filmmaking brings to focus several important and reoccurring themes in this tradition. First, it demonstrates the centrality of the documentary form to Iranian cinema as a whole. Second, it historically identifies documentary filmmaking as a tool for education and propagation. Finally, it brings to light early friction between two opposing forces: foreign on the one hand and local-governmental on the other.

²¹ In “Iranian Cinema in the Twentieth Century: A Sensory History,” Negar Mottahedeh argues that Mozzafar al-Din’s role in the bringing cinema to Iran foresees the politicalization of the form in subsequent decades (2009: 529).

²² Massoud Mehrabi, “*Farhang-e film’hā-ye mostanad-e sinemā-ye Irān: az āghāz tā sāl-e 1375* [A Guide to Iranian Documentary Films: From the Beginning to 1997] (Tehran: Daftar-e Pezhuhash’hā-ye farhangi, 1375/1997), 8.

²³ Mehrabi, *Guide to Iranian Documentary Films*, 9.

During the late 1920s and 1930s, documentary filmmaking in the country was dominated by foreign nationals, who came to Iran to record the country's development, and they covered diverse topics such as the condition of factories, the development of the railroad, and the status of nomadic tribes. However, these films effectively demonstrated the "poverty, backwardness, and primitive lifestyles" of Iran,²⁴ and as a result, many of them were banned from being shown in the country. In the 1940s, Iran witnessed a decline in the film industry as the country suffered economically as a result of World War II and politically because of the abdication of Reza Shah. Nevertheless, the rise of Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, to the throne and growing Cold War concern in the United States began the process of repairing the film industry in Iran and particularly documentary filmmaking. In 1951, a joint effort between the United States Information Services (USIS) and the Iranian Fine Arts Administration (which would later become the Ministry of Culture) brought a team of technicians from Syracuse University to train filmmakers and create a series of 88 documentaries on topics such as sanitation, nutrition, and national geography. The Syracuse University delegation also helped found an audio-visual production center within the Fine Arts Administration. These efforts and developments led to the national rise of documentary as a governmental propagandist institution that "represented the country at the end of its backwardness."²⁵ These official

²⁴ Mehrabi, *Guide to Iranian Documentary Films*, 9.

²⁵ Mehrabi, *Guide to Iranian Documentary Films*, 11.

productions provided a counter-narrative to the foreign documentaries from the 1920s and 1930s that emphasized the country's struggle to modernize.

This use of the documentary form in the 1950s led in the 1960s to what Bill Nichols calls a “shift of epistemological proportions.” Of the American tradition, Nichols explains that whereas previously documentary “suggested fullness and completion, knowledge and fact,” more recently it has taken on the character of “incompleteness and uncertainty.”²⁶ In Iran, the 1960s and 1970s marked the arrival of this new reflexive documentary style that coincided with the New Wave movement, which is generally regarded as a trend within narrative filmmaking. These documentaries, which included Ebrahim Golestan's *Kharābābād* [Ruinvile] (1962), Forugh Farrokhzad's *Khāneh siāh ast* [The House is Black] (1962), Kamran Shirdel's *Tehrān pāytakht-e Irān ast* [Tehran is the Capital of Iran] (1966) and *Un shab keh bārun umad* [The Night It Rained] (1967), Nader Afsharnaderi's *Balut* [Oak] (1968), Naser Taqva'i *Nakhl* [Palm] (1970), Manuchehr Tayab's *Ritm* [Rhythm] (1972), and Parviz Kimiavi's *Peh mesl-e pelikān* [P as in Pelican] (1973), attempt to unravel documentary's claim to the real by problematizing its informing logic. This corpus of films challenges the presumed indexical relationship to a lived, historical world, and it inspired a trend within Iranian cinema that uses this “truth form” to reveal counter-intuitively a series of untruths.

²⁶ Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 1.

Kamran Shirdel's *Un shab keh bārūn umad* [The Night It Rained] (1967) is a representative example of the move in Iranian documentary filmmaking that calls into question the filmic formation of truth. The film provides a particularly engaging exploration into the nature of the relationship between documentary and the real within the Iranian tradition. The documentary takes as its starting point a story from recent headlines and constructs the viewer's initial understanding of the event by showing the printed media's coverage of it. At the start of the film, a barrage of newspaper headlines and articles flash across the screen. A young boy heroically stopped a 200-person passenger train outside of the village of Gorgān before it reached a bridge that had been washed out by heavy rains. The film reveals its purpose by showing a letter from the Ministry of Art and Culture that commissions the film crew to make a documentary about the event. The film primarily comprises a number of contradictory statements by journalists, railway employees, and government officials, none of whom can agree about the specific details of the event or even if it happened at all. The most contested detail is whether or not the boy would have been able to use kerosene to light his jacket on fire in order to signal the train to stop during a heavy rainstorm. While logic prevails for many of the subjects interviewed, the most devoted advocates of the story insist that it was possible for the boy to ignite his jacket despite rain heavy enough to wash away a bridge.

Shirdel skillfully juxtaposes contradictory statements to underscore the unreliability of evidence, and in the process he casts doubt on the whole system of knowledge: how we create, access, and maintain knowledge. Early in the film, he also

highlights a disconnection between the spoken voice and the corresponding images on the screen: “Conversations between the men of Lāmelang” signals the image of men standing silently with cigarettes in their mouths and “Lāmelang with its pleasant climate and hospitable inhabitants” cues several shots of dogs playing in the rain.²⁷ The uncertainty comes to a head late in the film, when the documentarian voice promises an interview with the heroic boy, who, the viewer hopes, will clarify the inconsistencies that the documentary has thus far uncovered. The boy’s statement conforms more or less to the affirmative statements in the film; however, Shirdel interrupts his version of the story with images and sounds of contestation: “it’s a pack of lies” and “unfortunately, that is not the case.” This technique breaks up and destabilizes the boy’s own account.

The viewer is later ushered into a one-room schoolhouse where a young boy is reading aloud from his textbook. The story that aurally unfolds is precisely the same sensational story that the newspapers and government have claimed for the boy, complete with the detail about the lit jacket, and the film never concludes whether the boy’s heroic act was inspired by the story or whether the textbook story led the boy to make up a similar story. *The Night It Rained* ends in the same pool of uncertainty it has created. A letter from the local governor to the Ministry of the Interior confirms the event reported

²⁷ As the film introduces the inhabitants and characteristics of Lāmelang, Shirdel includes a frame of a man described as “the village idiot.” The still is actually taken from Forugh Farrokhzad’s famous documentary *Khāneh siāh ast* [The House is Black] (1962), which documents daily life of a leper colony in northern Iran. *The House is Black* similarly compounds the viewer’s understanding of the relationship between the documentary voice and the visual evidence. The film features two voices: the voice of science and reasoning (performed by a man, Ebrahim Golestan) and an emotional, poetic voice (performed by a female, Farrokhzad). The film indicates that the condition of leprosy is better described in poetic terms than scientific. For more on this important film, see Hamid Dabashi, “Forugh Farrokhzad: *The House is Black*,” *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2007): 39-70.

in the newspapers is correct, which prompts a flood of audio-visual material that point to the story's many fallacies. This analysis of *The Night It Rained* demonstrates within the Iranian tradition a subversive use of documentary intended to compound the viewer's conception of reality by providing layers of uncertainty and contradictory evidence. By calling the category of evidence into question, the film also questions the construction of truth. In the case of *The Night It Rained*, who is responsible for determining *the truth*? This unanswered question in the film serves to interrogate epistemological uncertainty as well. *The Night It Rained*'s appropriation of the documentary form to question these categories ultimately shaped future cinematic efforts in Iran, including Rakhshan Bani-E'temad's *Under the Skin of the City*.

Bani-E'temad's long and complicated relationship with the documentary has critically informed her representation of it in *Under the Skin of the City*. Like Iranian cinema, the director's career began with documentary. She directed documentaries for television early in her career and has continued to make documentaries alongside her feature films. The director notes that "Documentary filmmaking is my first love," and she claims that "it is a way of keeping in touch with the multiple layers of society"²⁸ and it allows her to "mediate more directly" her social "apprehensions."²⁹ However, Bani-E'temad also laments the fact that "documentaries are seen less often and discussed less frequently." As a result, she locates the value of narrative film in its ability to "relate

²⁸ Ditmars, "Rakshan Bani-E'temād talks to Hadani Ditmars about bending the rules in 'May Lady,'" 20.

²⁹ Rakshan Bani-E'temad, "Man filmsāz-e herfe-i nistam: harf-hā'i az Rakhshān-e Bani-E'temād" [I am not a Professional Filmmaker: a Few Words from Rakhshan Bani-E'temād], *Film* 19.263 (2001), 124.

more often and more easily to a sympathetic audience.”³⁰ Ultimately, Bani-E’tamad finds the documentary medium “More appealing, and this aspect comes out consequently in [her] narrative films.”³¹ The director reconciles her competing desires to create documentary and to attract and affect a wider audience by blending narrative and documentary forms, and *Under the Skin of the City* is representative of this composite style at the same time that it destabilizes it. The director shows the documentary filmmaking process, creates documentary-style footage and includes sound bites from real political speeches, but the film was released as a feature and at several points it refers to its own creative structure.

The classic theory of suture proves useful to demonstrating the effect of Bani-E’tamad’s amalgamated style in *Under the Skin of the City*. At their core, theories of suture consider how a narrative film’s visual structure calls the viewer into subjectivity and invites the viewer into the narrative space. Through a series of mediated gazes and a carefully controlled shot/reverse-shot pattern, the viewer is made to identify with characters in the film. Once the gap between the screen and the audience, the object and subject, has been closed, the viewer increasingly yearns for the comforts of narrative, especially at moments when the film’s act of enunciation is revealed or potentially revealed.³² In *Under the Skin of the City*, references to documentary filmmaking and

³⁰ Rakshan Bani-E’tamad, “Man filmsāz-e herfe-i nistam,” 124.

³¹ Rakshan Bani-E’tamad, “Man filmsāz-e herfe-i nistam,” 124.

³² My understanding of suture has been informed in large part by Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) and Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Kryztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 2001).

documentary-style footage break up the signifying chain created by the suture. As a result, the viewer is denied full entrance into the visual pleasure of narrative and is instead left grounded in a lived, historical reality, signified by the documentary moments. The complexity of Bani-E'temad's ensures the reverse-operation's functionality.

Although suture scholarship focuses primarily on narrative film, it is worth considering a parallel process for documentary films, wherein the viewer is intellectually immersed in the process of constructing and identifying an argument about the historical world. *Under the Skin of the City*, which destabilizes its documentary-ethos with its narrativized qualities, prevents the viewer from giving in completely to a documentary's argument-based structure. Like Shirdel's *The Night It Rained*, *Under the Skin of the City* uses both contradictory evidence and competing modes of representation to destabilize the historical world it attempts to represent.

Under the Skin of the City's narrative is framed by two documentary moments. The film opens with a close-up shot of a film crew's video display. The blurry image in the display focuses to show the head of a woman. A man's voice says, "Let's roll" before reminding the woman, "Your scarf...Fix your hair!" She promptly adjusts her headscarf and the man asks, "How do you assess the role of female workers in the upcoming elections?" As the woman attempts to answer, the camera moves left and settles on the display-image's source: the woman sitting at a table with a man and a camera aimed at her. The woman is unable to answer the question beyond a statement of religiosity, and several women on the sideline shout their own thoughts as the man ends the interview

and requests some shots of the women working at their factory posts. These images roll along with the opening credits. This first scene plays an important role in the establishment of the film's documentary-ethos. Iranian censorship codes prohibit the appearance of women in close up shots and women must remain properly covered whenever on screen.³³ The film's first moments both push the boundaries of acceptability and provide the viewer with the sense of witnessing something unproduced and not yet ready for public consumption. The film's first active moment—the display's pull to focus—reinforces the scene's raw feel.

The film crew never formally exits the film's narrative, and the viewer is left to wonder whether the crew has been incorporated into the film's diegetic space or if the film crew acts as a bridge between the film's diegesis and the film's extra-diegetic and self-conscious documentary world. The reappearance of the same crew in the film's very last scene complicates further this distinction. A transition between a wide shot of 'Abbas running through the streets and a close-up of Tuba signals the film's final scene. This transition also marks the moment at which the camera once again shares its perspective with a documentarian's. Asked to explain why she is voting, Tuba eloquently articulates her reasons for voting, but a high pitched beep interrupts her several times and finally a familiar voice (the interviewer from the film's first scene) asks her to start over because of technical problems. Clearly frustrated, Tuba complains, "Just forget about it! I just lost

³³ Hamid Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update," *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002): 41-44.

my house, my son ran away, and people are filming all the time.” Her final observation allows the viewer to consider the possibility that the same film crew has been following her throughout the course of the film, in which case this documentary’s informing logic would hinge on the development of Tuba’s political identity as enacted by the film’s events. By taking on the classification of “documentary,” as the framing permits, *Under the Skin of the City* would make the claim that the world it represents bears an indexical relationship to the lived, historical world.

However, just as easily as Bani-E’temad suggests the possibility that this film is a documentary so too does she provide evidence to the contrary. To return to the film’s first scene, when the video-display pulls to focus, the viewer encounters Golab Adineh, a well-known actress in Iran. Bani-E’temad noted that she envisioned Adineh in that role when she started revising the screenplay six years before production began.³⁴ The director’s decision to employ professional actors, including her own daughter Baran Kosari in the role of Mahbubeh, runs contrary to the trend in Iranian New Wave Cinema to employ actors who have little or no acting experience. The result of this decision in *Under the Skin of the City*’s is the viewer’s simultaneous desire to read the opening scene as documentary and to acknowledge the fact that the woman in the frame does not work in a factory but is instead a popular actress. Slavoj Žižek’s concept of “interface,” a self-conscious screen within a screen that threatens a film’s delicate fictive web,³⁵ further

³⁴ Rakhshan Bani-E’temad, “Man filmsāz-e herfe-i nistam,” 123.

³⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears*, 52.

obscures generic classification. The film crew's video display, by referencing the act of production, shows how *Under the Skin of the City* refuses to submit the normative features of narrative film.

In the film's final scene, the director similarly complicates the audience's ability to negotiate the real and the performative, the historical and the imagined. After noting that she is constantly being filmed, Tuba emotionally pleads, "I wish someone would come and film what's going on right here. Right here! Who do you show these films to, anyway?" Tuba thus probes the limits of the documentary form and questions its inability to capture the depths of human suffering. She also questions the ability of documentary filmmaking to reach wide audiences. Film critic Rahul Hamid argues that this criticism by Tuba "betrays Bani-E'temad's ambivalent feelings towards...the movie craze in Iran—and perhaps the political efficacy of cinema itself."³⁶ However, this categorization describes too broadly the reach of Tuba's statement. Bani-E'temad instead reveals an unmediated tension between documentary and narrative styles, in which the socially committed documentary form lacks affective prowess and therefore fails to reach diverse audiences.

Hamid's misreading of this scene results from a misunderstanding of Tuba's final question, "*in film 'hā ro be ki neshun midin?*" [Who do you show these films to, anyway?]. This question, which clearly references the narrow reach of documentary filmmaking, is also an ironic and self-referential act on the part of Bani-E'temad. *Who Do*

³⁶ Hamid, "Review," 51.

You Show These Films To, Anyway? is the title of a documentary that Bani-E'temad directed in 1993. It focuses on a poor housing community in south Tehran and, therefore, shares similar concerns with *Under the Skin of the City*. This reference to Bani-E'temad's corpus of work combined with Tuba's affected plea interrupts the informed viewer's inclination to read this final moment as documentary, because the director stages a confrontation with the artificiality of documentary filmmaking, which runs contrary to the viewer's expectations regarding the relationship between documentary and the real.

Tuba's closing statement thereby captures the complexities of Bani-E'temad's composite style in *Under the Skin of the City*. Her words, which criticize the sterile question-and-answer documentary form, enact an affective desire that is perhaps satisfied by the film's fictional structure and scenes. At the same time, this criticism creates a sense of urgency and relevance that ends the film. By creating and resolving, mediating and destabilizing, the tension between documentary and narrative forms, Bani-E'temad interrogates a relationship between truth and myth. This relationship is central to *Under the Skin of the City*, in which the city of Tehran represents an urban reality that is capable of demystifying a popular but misinformed representation of the Reformist Movement.

Urban Myth

While films by 'Abbas Kiarostami, Majid Majidi, and Mohsen Makhmalbaf often focus on rural environments and depend on bucolic landscapes to produce a distinct

poetic neorealist style,³⁷ which dates back to Dariush Mehrjui's *Gāv* [The Cow] (1969), Rakhshan Bani-E'temad's films constitute a separate track in Iranian New Wave Cinema that interrogates urban spaces and experiences. For Bani-E'temad, Tehran is a site of "perplexing contradictions" that function alongside a "concentration of politics, economics and social issues" to make the city seem bigger and more "chaotic" each day.³⁸ As such, Tehran serves as a complicated and unstable character in all of her films. Even in *Gilāneh* [Gilaneh] (2004), the story of a disabled veteran and his mother living in the quiet hills of northern Iran, Bani-E'temad notes that Tehran asserts its presence through the threats of displacement and urban migration.³⁹ *Under the Skin of the City* (2001) represents one of Bani-E'temad's most complex portrayals of Tehran. In this film, the director explores the political possibility of the metropolis and she envisions the capital city and its many paradoxes as signifiers of a reality covered up or overlooked by the Reformist Movement's mythic presence.

Like documentary, urbanism allows Rakhshan Bani-E'temad to investigate the representation of reality and to consider the ways in which multiple urban realities coalesce. This effort resonates with a long tradition in Iranian cinema, and in particular with a set of pre-Revolution metropolitan films that use the city of Tehran to expose the realities of harsh living conditions under Pahlavi rule. Farrokh Ghaffari's *Jonub-e shahr*

³⁷ Stephen Winberger, "Neorealism, Iranian Style," *Iranian Studies* 40 no.1 (2007), 5-16, and Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn, "The Open Image: Poetic Realism and the New Iranian Cinema," *Screen* 44 no.1 (Spring 2004): 38-57.

³⁸ Hamed Safaee and Vahid Parsa, "Tehrān; shahr-e bi-hāfezeh" [Tehran: The City that Forgets], *Tehran Avenue* (May 2007): <http://www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=693>.

³⁹ Hamed Safaee and Vahid Parsa, "Tehrān; shahr-e bi-hāfezeh"

[*South of the City*] (1958) was the first film to provide a critical representation of Tehran. The film tells the story of a woman who slowly discovers a friend's secret profession as a prostitute, and this plotline, as Hamid Reza Sadr notes, permits the exposure of the city's "dark underbelly."⁴⁰ Through this revelation, Ghaffari provides an alternative narrative to the Pahlavi government's promotion of the country at the time as an oil-rich, modern nation. Through displays of unjust violence, the film also criticizes the *luti* system, a code of urban masculinity that has been valorized throughout much of Iran's modern history.⁴¹ A *luti* genre of films popular in the mid-twentieth century especially mythologized this urban figure and turned him into a kind of Robin Hood character.⁴² *South of the City*, however, casts the *luti* in the role of pimp and thug and shows him as a deeply troubled character who lives outside of the rules of society not for the betterment of his community but rather for his own benefit.

Ghaffari's depiction of the truths that underlined modernization and the *luti* myths required that the director violate the thematic and technological norms of Iranian cinema at the time. Indeed, *South of the City* was the first Iranian film to leave the set behind and shoot on location in the city's streets. This innovation led to a gritty and realistic representation of Tehran's poor districts that left many viewers unsettled. The film's

⁴⁰ Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 115.

⁴¹ For a thorough account of the *luti* and his political role in Iran's modern history, see Willem M. Floor, "The Political Role of Lutis in Iran," *Modern Iran: The Dialects of Continuity and Change*, eds. Michael E. Bonine and Nikki R. Keddie (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981), 83-95.

⁴² For an analysis of one of these films, *Dash Akol* (1971) directed by Masud Kimiai, see Hamid Naficy, "Iranian Writers, Iranian Cinema, and the Case of 'Dash Akol'" *Iranian Studies* 18, nos. 2-4 (Spring-Autumn 1985), 231-251.

main actor, Ebrahim Baqeri, was even assaulted for his controversial portrayal of the *luti* system and this act brings to focus the power of Ghaffari's realistic style. The Pahlavi regime was also threatened by the unfavorable and realistic representation of life in south Tehran, and the film was banned and confiscated shortly after its release. The government reissued the film under the title *Reqābat dar shahr* [Rivalry in the City]. This version of the film was so heavily censored that it no longer bore the critical traces of its predecessor, and it was even promoted as "preserving the traditional customs and beliefs of the honorable *lutis*."⁴³ The case of *South of the City* is productive to the present analysis of Bani-E'temad's *Under the Skin of the City* because it serves as a precedent within the Iranian cinematic tradition for probing the city of Tehran to uncover and complicate politico-cultural myth by providing urban images of the real (the real streets of Tehran, the real effects of modernization, and the real qualities of the *luti*) and thereby establishing a counter-narrative.

It is worth noting that Ghaffari's film had a significant impact on other directors, who began using the city in this way. Notably, Kamran Shirdel was commissioned by the Shah to create a series of documentaries that exalted the government's modernization project. Instead, the director took his camera to the streets of Tehran and created an eighteen-minute documentary called *Tehrān pāytakht-e Irān ast* [Tehran is the Capital of Iran] (1966) that included startling images of city's poorest citizens sleeping on sidewalks and in back alleys. The message was clear: streets of Tehran *were* the reality of

⁴³ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 115.

the Shah's modernization process, which excluded and hid a huge portion of the country's population that did not fit into the orderly system that the Shah envisioned.⁴⁴

In *Under the Skin of the City*, Rakhshan Bani-E'temad excavates the urban structures of Tehran in order to unravel the myth of the Reformist Movement. More specifically, she attempts to expose the hopes and promises of the Reformist Movement as they are reflected in a sprawling and unrelenting cityscape. This process resonates with Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, a mammoth and unfinished text concerned with the "dissolution of 'mythology' into the space of history."⁴⁵ Benjamin envisaged *The Arcades Project*, which he began in 1927 and worked tirelessly on until his death in 1940, as a means of clearing away "the undergrowth of delusion and myth" from "the terrain of the nineteenth century."⁴⁶ Paris, as the capital of the nineteenth century, represents a dreamworld of modernity, and its inhabitants, a dreaming collectivity, "find their expression in the dream and their interpretation in awakening."⁴⁷ The moment of awakening, or interpretation, becomes the negation of myth. In *The Arcades Project*, this process is achieved through an excavation of Paris, wherein the "afterlife of the recent past provides for an archeology of dreaming."⁴⁸ Paris as metropolis is particularly meaningful for Benjamin as a site of obsolete objects and dialectal images. On the one

⁴⁴ Other urban films that featured gritty and unflinching representations of Tehran include *Khesht va āyeneh* [Mud Brick and Mirror] (1966) directed by Ebrahim Golestan, *Qeisar* (1969) by Masud Kimiai, and *Zir-e pust-e shab* [Under the Skin of the Night] (1974) by Feridun Goleh.

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 458.

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 456-4587.

⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 392.

⁴⁸ Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1996), 111.

hand, “the outmoded object defetishizes and demythifies the commodity and the process of its production, exchange and consumption in the city.”⁴⁹ On the other hand, the dialectal image, as an apparatus that acknowledges the “telescoping of the past through the present,”⁵⁰ facilitates the “decay” of history “into images, not into stories”⁵¹ It is modernity’s claim of progress, continuity—the end of the myth—that Benjamin opposes, and Paris in the early twentieth century, underneath its intoxicating pull, illuminated the fallacy of the various mechanisms, like capitalism and progress, that allowed modernity to participate in myth-making.

Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* is bound geographically, temporally, and thematically to Paris, the nineteenth century, and modernity. Nevertheless, through his work he articulates a vocabulary for representing the city, its complexities and disintegration, in order to highlight movement and conflict but not progress. In particular, the author employs a methodology in *The Arcades Project* that permits “text-as-city” and “city-as-text.”⁵² In other words, Benjamin invites the reader to consider the city as a text, a collection of symbols, images, and motifs that can be interrogated and interpreted to further our understanding of urban realities. At the same time, he promotes the notion that urban content should generate a distinct urban form that replicates in some manner the structures and experiences of the metropolis. Susan Buck-Morss (1989) and Graeme Gilloch (1996) agree that the impetus for *The Arcades Project* began not in France but in

⁴⁹ Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, 110.

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 473.

⁵¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 476.

⁵² Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, 94.

Italy with his short essay “Naples” (1924).⁵³ Benjamin’s *magnum opus*, therefore, constitutes the culmination of a decade-long strong struggle to represent the fragmentation and disorientation of the metropolis. It is from these larger concerns about representing city and myth that I derive utility from Benjamin’s methodology in *The Arcades Project* and appropriate his ideas to my reading of Bani-E’tamad’s *Under the Skin of the City*.

Benjamin clearly states his approach in *The Arcades Project*: “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show.”⁵⁴ As such, *The Arcades Project* comprises an expansive collection of fragmented source material and commentary arranged in loosely organized and sometimes thematically overlapping convolutes. This approach, which Gilloch calls an “archeo-monadological practice”⁵⁵ that reorganizes old fragments into new configurations, accords with Benjamin’s Thesis III in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that the historical materialist “recites events without distinguishing between the major and minor...”⁵⁶ At the same time, this level of fragmentation and materiality textually replicate the experience of the city, a space of intoxicating perplexity. Despite one’s desire to see the city as a continuous whole, the ability to experience it in its entirety remains evasive, and one must instead construct an understanding of city through disjointed encounters with it.

⁵³ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 26.

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460.

⁵⁵ Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, 115.

⁵⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Pantheon, 1968), 254.

Benjamin's literary montage has its origins in photography and film.⁵⁷ In his famous treatise "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), which was written at the same time that he was working on *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin notes that:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations, and our factories appeared to have us locked up and hopeless. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling.⁵⁸

Cinema processes the ability to introduce us to "an unconscious optic" of the city in the same way that psychoanalysis uncovers "unconscious impulses."⁵⁹ It creates new urban perceptions by reorganizing conceptions of space and time through techniques like the close-up and slow motion and historically redeems the urban center by isolating objects. Film captures and preserves the fleeting fragments of the city and flattens the space between the viewer and the viewed, subject and object.⁶⁰ Benjamin articulates a spatial relationship between cinema and the city that anticipates in interesting ways the so-called "spatial turn" in cultural theory of the 1970s and 1980s.

Tehran's spatiality is exceedingly important to Bani-E'temad's style of representation in *Under the Skin of the City*. Although Hamid Dabashi claims that in this film the director's "camera has lost its touch" and fallen into the category of "routine

⁵⁷ Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, 45.

⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Pantheon, 1968), 236.

⁵⁹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 237.

⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 231.

reportage,”⁶¹ I argue that through a series of spatially organized fragments, Bani-E’temad’s camera uniquely and innovatively redeems Tehran from the Reformist Movement’s dreamworld. The terms of the Reformist myth are established early in the film. The film enters its narrative after the documentary-framing by means of a bus ride through the streets of Tehran. It is fitting that as both Tuba and the viewer journey into the fictional domain they are made to listen to a political speech delivered by Khatami. Although the 1997 elections serve as a regular feature in the film’s background, it is only in this moment early in the film that the Reformist Movement is given voice. Bani-E’temad cleverly manipulates the authentic sound file to highlight the Movement’s mythic premise. Khatami says, “And we shall broaden democracy and progress toward a civil society. We will try to strengthen continually the dignity and stability of this nation. Our developments were the product of a great revolution and our problems...” At this point, noises from a street fight drown out Khatami. The speech returns as Khatami says, “The result was first and foremost a recovery of ourselves and particularly of our youth...” before fading out once again. In many ways, this speech is very typical and likely recognizable to Iranian viewers. It pays homage to the revolution, emphasizes the importance of engaging the youth, and outlines Khatami’s goals for his country, including democracy and civil society, two words that frequently entered his rhetoric.

⁶¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema Past, Present and Future* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 242.

By controlling the viewer's access to the audio clip, Bani-E'temad constructs and articulates a particular view of the Reformist Movement that informs the film throughout. It is significant that Bani-E'temad chooses to disrupt the speech with noises from the street. This clip, like a film's soundtrack, exists in an extra-diegetic space and not within the characters' lives or world. It instead plays *over* the fictional realm. The fact that noises on the streets can interrupt the speech establishes a central thesis in *Under the Skin of the City*, as it becomes apparent that the viewer's audio-visual encounters with the urban experience alter and reconfigure his understanding of the Reformist Movement.

This rupture occurs at crucial part in the speech, right as Khatami is preparing to describe the country's problems. The implication of this cut is that Khatami and the Reformist Movement have no conception of local problems. The images of the scene—a brawl between members of the *basij* and young campaigners—reinforces this idea by providing a visual alternative to the words “democracy” and “civil society” that play moments before. The rupture in speech also tears the narrative's suture. In other words, the speech and the contradicting images pull the viewer's attention away from the narrative (i.e. Tuba's journey home) and towards the historical world (i.e. Khatami's election). This method heightens the viewer's awareness of fragility of both truth and fiction, because Bani-E'temad interrupts both real, recognizable speeches and her own narrative.

Jāme'eh-ye madani or civil society formed the basis of Khatami's moderate political platform during the 1997 elections. Understanding the limits of the political

system and the nature of factionalism in Iran at the time, Khatami was cautious not to define clearly what he meant by “civil society” or how he intended to deliver the country to that ideal. Mohsen Kadivar, a well-known theologian, suggested that civil society represented during the elections an alternative to *velāyat-e faqih*, the basis for the governmental system in the Islamic Republic.⁶² As such, Khatami easily garnered support from young voters, who were increasingly frustrated with the political and economic status quo in the late 1990s, without ever revealing a salient civil-society agenda. However, as Mehran Kamrava has noted, shortly after Khatami’s election, Iranians began demanding accountability and sought to understand how the new president intended to revise the Islamic Republic’s legal system to include the ideals of civil society, like tolerance, freedom, and mutual respect.⁶³ Over the next two years, and especially after a series of violent attacks on student protestors in 1999, people became increasingly skeptical of Khatami’s ability to deliver on his promise of civil society.⁶⁴

Although *Under the Skin of the City* takes place during the 1997 elections, it was filmed and produced in 2000, as disillusionment with Khatami and his promise of a civil society were on the rise. Bani-E’tamad, therefore, re-examines the historic elections and

⁶² Mohsen Kadivar, *Salām*, 17 August 1997.

⁶³ Mehran Kamrava, “The Civil Society Discourse in Iran,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 28.2 (2001), 170.

⁶⁴ Saïd Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under His Successors* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95-97. For a particularly compelling discussion of the ways in which the framework of the Islamic Republic is unable to accommodate the freedoms of civil society, see Bahrām Rahmāni, *Afsāneh-ye jāme’eh-ye madani* [The Myth of Civil Society] (Köln, Germany: Forugh Books, 2001). This book, published around the time of Khatami’s re-election, is representative of Iranian disillusionment with their president. As a political/philosophical text it resonates with Rakhshan Bani-E’tamad’s cinematic effort in *Under the Skin of the City*.

gently uncovers in Tehran's cityscape the ways in which Khatami's rhetoric of democracy and civil society failed to address the country's problems even in 1997. There is a commonly held belief that Khatami's efforts to enact reform were blocked by conservative forcers⁶⁵ and that had he been successful, the country would have experienced a political, cultural, and economic revival. This understanding of the situation constitutes the myth of the Reformist Movement,⁶⁶ against which *Under the Skin of the City* reacts. For Bani-E'temad, the city of Tehran functions as a particularly poignant example of the ways in which broad notions of democracy and civil society—reform within the existing structures of the Islamic Republic of Iran—were never able to address local and economic problems. Khatami, as a cleric and former associate of Khomeini, was attempting to create reform from the top-down, but Bani-E'temad's *Under the Skin of the City* returns this political narrative to the street level and this vantage point is revealing.

The street-level perspective adds a fragmented dimension to the representation of Tehran in *Under the Skin of the City*. The film is absent of wide-angle shots that show large segments of the city and does not feature any aerial views that attempt to capture visually the city's entirety. Michel de Certeau distinguishes between those who read the

⁶⁵ Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 257-265.

⁶⁶ My assessment of the Reformist Movement in this way is not an attempt to belittle the efforts of Mohammad Khatami or to devalue the appeal of his platform. Bani-E'temad's film *Ruzegār-e mā...* [Our Times] (2001), a documentary about the 2001 elections, demonstrates how strongly some people believed in these concepts. Rather, I am stressing that his big-picture ideas were unaware of the urgency of the economic hardships that most Iranians faced.

city from above with panoramic views and those who walk the city, writing it without being able to read it.⁶⁷ (de Certeau 1987: 92-3). In *Under the Skin of the City*, Bani-E'temad's camerawork invites the viewer to identify with the latter. The film's title is especially instructive in this regard; it suggests that the director seeks to probe the urban existence beyond images of the surface. This film title is a reference to Faridun Goldeh's 1974 film *Zir-e pust-e shab* [Under the Skin of the Night].⁶⁸ The phrase *zir-e pust-e shab* generally means "nightlife" and is also the Persian term used to refer to a genre of films popular in the 1960s and 1970s. These films, usually geared towards western audiences, depict a glamorous and enticing nightlife in various Asian cities like Beirut, Shanghai, and Tehran. Goldeh's film provides a counter-narrative to this genre by showing one poor man's unsuccessful attempts to gain access to the city's nightlife. Both *Under the Skin of the Night* and *Under the Skin of the City*, therefore, dispel popular myths through representations of a diverse range of experiences in Tehran.

In order to capture several different urban perspectives, Bani-E'temad creates a fragmented picture of Tehran, as the camera moves disjointedly from one geographic location to another but never provides a large-scale image of the space traversed. The film's visual and narrative structures depend in large part on complementary and thematically-related scenes from different sectors of the city. An architectural firm on the top floor of a skyscraper in downtown Tehran is contrasted, for example, with the textile

⁶⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 92-3.

⁶⁸ The similarities between the two titles is more apparent in the original Persian, because the pronunciation of the words for "city" (*shahr*) and "night" (*shab*) differ only in their final consonantal sounds.

factory where Tuba works. The office scene features classical music playing in the background and shows an orderly arrangement of desks and offices occupied by men and women in colorful western-style clothing. The noise of the machines in the factory provides an uncomfortable point of contrast for the viewer, who has just been drawn in by the soft sounds of classical music in the office. The factory is employed only by women, who are all dressed in traditional black veils. The vertical scan of the office's skyscraper and the camera's horizontal movement in the factory emphasize the city as a three-dimensional space. The value of occupying the city's highest point is highlighted by the film as 'Abbas enters the skyscraper and his friends warn him, "Don't forget us little people on your way up!"'

Under the Skin of the City similarly compares geographically diverse social structures, and the family is a particularly rich area of exploration for the film. In one scene, Tuba arrives home and discovers her granddaughter playing in the narrow alleys of the neighborhood. Explaining her unexpected arrival, the granddaughter says, "Daddy beat up Mommy and told her to get lost...so we came here!" The members of the family have competing approaches to Hamideh's arrival and her presence becomes a source of contention. Their reactions range from Mahmud's anger to Mahbubeh's meddling to Tuba's pragmatism that the family does not have the physical space or financial resources to care for a pregnant woman and her young daughter. The house's architecture and, specifically, its courtyard mediates the conversation and emphasizes the family's lack of space. A traditional Iranian home features several rooms or apartments organized around

a central courtyard. In this instance, Hamideh stands in the small central courtyard and the family members offer their commentary from the various rooms or during their passage between them. The lack of privacy both within and outside of the home is apparent, and at one point, Tuba, afraid that the neighbors will hear, reprimands Mahmud for yelling through the door.

The scene switches to a house in an affluent neighborhood in north Tehran, and the camera captures the area's desirable hilltop view of the city. Inside, the home's texture is rich with lush fabrics and it comprises only interior spaces, unlike the traditional court-yard structure that the film emphasizes in the preceding scene. A fight between mother and son ensues; the son has been stealing car radios despite having the financial means to buy them and the family's reputation is at stake. 'Abbas interrupts the quarrel and the son mocks him for his work ethic, even though they are approximately the same age. Mother and son fight for control of the car keys; the son is eventually victorious and speeds away, nearly hitting 'Abbas as he walks on the side of the street.

Bani-E'temad's technique with these juxtaposed scenes is reminiscent of Benjamin's method of laying out fragmented and often related observations and pieces of information as a means of encouraging the reader to draw his or her own inferences and make his or her own connections. Within film studies, montage as a cinematic methodology has been theorized by Sergei Eisenstein, who sees all art, including cinema,

in terms of “conflict.”⁶⁹ For Eisenstein, montage represents the development of an idea through the “collision of independent shots.”⁷⁰ The dynamism that results from the collisions of independent shots acts as a site for the production of new ideas and concepts. In other words, unexpected contradictions and conclusions explode from the collision of two shots “opposite to one another.”⁷¹ In *Under the Skin of the City*, the fragmented vignettes underscore a geographically and economically diverse set of urban realities that equally constitute Tehran. At the same time, these fragmented scenes together generate some threads of continuity related to the experiences of family and reputation.

Under the Skin of the City thus fragments the city of Tehran by providing the viewer with juxtaposing sights “that are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big-city traffic.”⁷² The film itself, however, is not fragmented and features a cohesive narrative structure that allows Bani-E’tamad to connect different segments of Tehran. *Under the Skin of the City* was one of the most successful films in Iran in 2001, and this achievement indicates the ways in which the film appealed to popular audiences, including the expectation of a coherent narrative. Rahul Hamid notes that “The majority of screen time is devoted to Abbas’s exploits, but Tuba is at the core of the film.”⁷³ The reason for this disparity in screen time rests in the fact that ‘Abbas plays a functional role

⁶⁹ Sergei Eisenstein, “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form,” *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (San Diego and New York: Harvest Books, 1969), 46.

⁷⁰ Eisenstein, “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form,” 49.

⁷¹ Eisenstein, “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form,” 49.

⁷² Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 250.

⁷³ Hamid, “Review,” 51.

in the film's geographic shifts. *Under the Skin of the City* consists, for the most part, of corresponding images from the north and the south, mediated by transitional highway scenes. 'Abbas, as a delivery boy, possesses the mobility necessary to permeate both spaces and functions as the viewer's guide. These regional shifts encourage the viewer to make comparisons—visually and socially, spatially and economically—between the two parts of the city and to consider the different ways that people make sense of their urban spaces and the vast differences in these approaches based on their geographic location within Tehran.

Highways, cars, and traffic as points in between these various locations together constitute a distinct kind of space in *Under the Skin of the City* that generates a constitutive set of economic, political, and social features. 'Abbas travels the streets and highways of the capital on his small scooter. Using a car borrowed from his boss, the entire family only makes one road trip together to north Tehran during the course of the film. This journey, which takes place early in the narrative, plays an important role in determining the symbolic distance between south Tehran and the financial districts of the north. Before the family enters the highway, they are stopped by a passing train, which stays on screen for over ten seconds. The viewer is thus made to wait just as the characters do, and the train's presence emphasizes the ways in which mobility is blocked or limited for those citizens in the southern part of the city. The scene continues with a series of shots that accentuate the highway's unrelenting size and capitalize on north Tehran's visible appeal.

Although the family begins its journey in daylight, the point of arrival is marked by the darkness of night, and Bani-E'temad thereby adds a temporal aspect to the city's spatial configuration. Tehran's structure depends on a spatial and social stratification that emerges along the city's horizontal axis to divide this urban space into clear north and south divisions. The city's middle- and upper-class residents live almost exclusively in the northern half of the city, and as geographer Ali Madanipour notes, this polarization remains "clearly visible in Tehran."⁷⁴

Under the Skin of the City demonstrates how this structure maintains social stratification through spatial means and effectively keeps Tehran's poorest citizens out of the city's financial centers through a highway system that is inaccessible to those individuals without a car. The absence of car ownership in the south is revealed in the film through an aerial shot of Tuba's neighborhood. The sound of a car alarm encourages the viewer to search through the monochrome sprawl of buildings and alleyways for the source the sound: the borrowed car uncomfortably parked in a drain. The southern neighborhood clearly lacks both the financial and spatial resources necessary to acquire a car, and *Under the Skin of the City* brings to light at several different points the difficulty of navigating Tehran's vast geography without one. The challenges of public transit emerge as Tuba and her coworkers are slowed by the sail-effect of their *chādors* while attempting to catch their bus home. Meanwhile, the perils of pedestrianism are conveyed to the viewer as 'Abbas walks back to work after returning a car to his boss's home and

⁷⁴ Ali Madanipour, *Tehran: the Making of a Metropolis* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 114.

is almost hit by the same car as a seemingly endless city sprawls before him. These moments test the bounds of access to urban space while drawing attention to social and economic diversity within the city.

For Bani-E'temad, the city's ability to represent the various human experiences that exist on its concrete surfaces extends beyond spatial and even temporal dimensions. Tehran functions as an affective surface that captures and mirrors the emotional responses and impulses of its inhabitants. In this way, Bani-E'temad's cinema gives in to Benjamin's notion that film opens up the viewer's perceptions of the city and, through camera work and editing, inscribes it with features that have previously gone unnoticed. In *Under the Skin of the City*, the streets and buildings of Tehran match the characters' excitement and elation, pain and suffering. For example, after 'Abbas declares his love to one of the women working in the architectural office and she receives him favorably, he flies on his scooter, weaving through the city's streets, which have been decorated with colorful lights for the Iranian New Year celebration called *Nowruz*. In the absence of music, 'Abbas' excitement in this moment is conveyed to the viewer through the city's visual appeal. The film's background thus takes on the characteristics of the protagonist, and this scene brings to focus the fact that the city is not always a site of impasse and fragmentation but also a place of inclusion. The city supports the characters in a way that they cannot necessarily support each other. It is Tehran's paradoxical ability to facilitate both rejection and acceptance that fascinates Bani-E'temad.

Nowhere do these contradictions become more apparent than within the cycles of construction and destruction that grow, rejuvenate, and paralyze every metropolis. The narrative, including the contractor who attempts to buy Tuba's house and 'Abbas' work with an architectural firm, provides the film with ample opportunity to show construction sites throughout the city, and it is never quite clear whether the viewer is witnessing a building in the process of construction or deconstruction. The visual similarities of these two in-between moments capture the fact that they are interrelated. That the city is replete with these cyclic processes becomes clearer when they are laced with human emotion. 'Abbas plows through the streets of Tehran after discovering that he was the victim of a scandal that robbed him of all his savings and the money acquired from the sale of his family's home. Despite his rapid progress through space and time, he is always framed by buildings that are being (de)constructed. These shells without windows or doors, concrete skeletons, reflect his anguish. His own financial, moral, and emotional destruction are captured perfectly by the half-completed/depleted structures, and his inability to escape them suggests the city as a dynamic space that functions outside of the bounds and laws of normal spatial experience by accommodating affective as well as temporal variables.

These moments of deconstruction are redeemed only at the point of construction. As Tuba packs and prepares to move, reduced once again to the role of tenant, her house is literally being torn down around her. The house that held her life together and once distinguished her as a homeowner now parallels her financial and familial ruin. However,

the film's final scene reveals Tuba's political hope as she lists the loss of her house and son as reasons for voting. This political hope, examined in greater depth later, is significant now because it functions as an act of productivity born of the destruction that film's events have facilitated. The relationship between the collapse of Tuba's house and the birth of her political identity suggests the city of Tehran as a cyclic site, a fact reinforced by the cycles in Tuba's own life and especially her return as a tenant. In her final statement, Tuba notes the historical cycles in which post-Revolution Iran has also been caught: "There was a time when we complained but you said we were fighting a war. It was the truth, so we accepted it. After the war, you asked us for patience because the country was in ruins, so once again, we put up with it all... Now there is someone who wants to save us, so I'm here to vote." Her use of the word ruins (*kherābeh*) is particularly interesting. Combined with the film's many demolished and collapsed sites/sights, it indicates the ways in which the city's surface encapsulates the country's social and economic problems. More than that, Tuba's final declaration, "I am here to vote," suggests that these ruins—both despite and because of their cyclical nature—can be appropriated as spots for improvement and reform, a characteristically urban process.

Under the Skin of the City's representation of Tehran through geographic fragmentation, cycles of de/construction, and an intimate relationship between building and affect sympathetically guides the viewer's gaze to the unique experiences of the city's marginalized poor working-class citizens. As a result, the film shows particular concern for the ways in which the political system (as represented by the elections in the

background) plays out in these poorer, districts of south Tehran. The director reinforces the existence of a relationship between the political system and south Tehran by locating the elections' presence only in the city's southern half. References to the Reformist Movement and the upcoming elections only appear in the sections of the film that focus on the southern part of the city. In his examination of Paris, Benjamin also takes an interest in the city's marginalized characters. He is particularly attracted to those individuals who position themselves outside of the normal cycles of consumerism and commodity; these figures on the cityscape become essential to his effort to uncover the myth of modernity. In a similar effort, Bani-E'temad focuses on Tehran's margins to expose the Reformist myth, and these characters and the neighborhoods they inhabit represent the holes left unfilled by the Reformist Movement's political platform.

The development of Tuba's political identity rests at the center of *Under the Skin of the City*. The film's documentary framing represents more than a generic reference; it also signals a documentary's informing logic. The documentary-framing at the beginning of the film signals to viewer that this film requires the interpretive skill set for an argument-based structure rather than a narrative plot. Therefore, if one were to evaluate *Under the Skin of the City* as a documentary—as the film's framing structure encourages—then one might interpret the rise of Tuba's political identity as a speculative solution to problems that the film depicts. Tuba's inability at the beginning of the film to communicate her expectations for elected officials and her final, articulate political

statement suggest that the film's tragic events have informed and inspired her newfound political involvement.

However, implicit in her statement is tension between the factors that have led her to vote and the aims of the candidate for whom she is voting. Tuba's remark that "Now there is someone who wants to save us, so I am here to vote" is punctuated by references to the loss of her house and son. The Reformist Movement—as represented in the film by Khatami's speech about democracy and civil society—seems unprepared to handle the economic and social concerns that have impacted Tuba's life. Making sense of this tension and determining the exact relationship between the hopes and needs of south Tehran and the Reformist Movement's proposed political shift represent one of the film's greatest challenges. Inequalities in housing and gender are two categories that prove useful to the analysis of the political incongruity that the film reveals.

Rakhshan Bani-E'temad has focused much of her career on the housing crisis in Tehran. She has directed three documentaries on the topic: *Gozāresh-e 71* [Report of 71] (1991), *In film 'hā ro be ki neshun midin?* [Who Do You Show These Films To, Anyway?] (1993), and *Bahār tā bahār* [Spring to Spring] (1995). Her interest in architectural and residential experiences figures into her feature films as well, including *Under the Skin of the City*. In this film, housing informs both the director's sociopolitical commentary and her cinematic style. She decided to film a large portion of the scenes as

long shots, and the intended effect was to mimic “peeping into a neighbor’s house from on top of the wall.”⁷⁵

It is important to note that traditional Iranian houses are surrounded and separated by walls that configure private and public spaces. That is, homes in Iran are fully private spaces, visually inaccessible to passersby on the street. Farzaneh Milani notes the relationship between this architectural feature and the practice of veiling, arguing that “Like walls that enclose houses and separate inner and outer spaces, the veil makes a clear statement about the disjunction between the private and the public.”⁷⁶ In *Under the Skin of the City*, the wall as unique neighborly architectural feature is highlighted. It serves as a meeting point for Mahbubeh and Masumeh, who climb up ladders and meet on top of the wall that separates their homes to study and gossip.

The film provides the viewer with a neighborly perspective that encourages the same kind of empathy as communal living. The film’s form adds force in this way to its critical observations on the status of housing in south Tehran. At the center of this crisis is a lack of physical space and a rapidly growing urban population; these problem necessitate the reorganization of traditional horizontal living structures to vertical structures that can accommodate more people. This desire to build up motivates the constructor who ultimately buys Tuba’s house, and this impetus is reinforced in the film with wide horizontal shots of the neighborhoods in south Tehran juxtaposed with narrow

⁷⁵ Samimi, “Yek sili-ye khoshāhang,” 132.

⁷⁶ Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 23.

vertical shots of north Tehran. The desirability of physical space in Tehran allows the contractor in the film to buy out entire neighborhoods in south Tehran, where the immediate need for access to financial resources outweighs the stability of homeownership.

The sale of Tuba's house affords 'Abbas the opportunity to purchase a visa to pursue his dreams abroad (with the additional promise of financial return), and it allows Mahmud, who is unemployed, to re-assert his power as the head of the home. However, it is Tuba who provides for the family and finds comfort in the stability of owning a home. After 'Abbas and Mahmud sell the family home, she laments, "I used to carry stuff on my back, moving from one rented house to another...Now, at this old age, when I need was some space, you had to do this?" Although Tuba believes that she has earned the right to homeownership, it eludes her because she is a woman, and the contractor, who tells Tuba to "Go to your man. I don't deal with womenfolk," demonstrates the dynamics of gender-segregation in homeownership. Tuba's namesake, likely a reference to Shahrnush Parispur's novel *Tubā va ma'nā-ye shab* [Tuba and the Meaning of Night] (1989),⁷⁷ similarly highlights a relationship between gender and homeownership. In Parsipur's historical novel, Tuba's status as a female homeowner at the turn of the century—the result of her young marriage to an older man and the subsequent divorce—distinguishes

⁷⁷ Bani-E'temad has a precedent for naming her female characters after important literary figures. For example, the main character in *Bānu-ye ordebehesht* [May Lady] (1998) is a documentary filmmaker named Forugh, who is shooting a film about motherhood. She is a clear reference to the famous poet Forugh Farrokhzad—also a documentary filmmaker—who likewise struggled with motherhood, losing custody of her only biological son and later adopting a child from a leper colony that was the site of her famous film *Khāneh siāh ast* [The House is Black] (1967).

her, and the financial and practical comforts of homeownership sets her on a path of discovery that allows her to uncover within Iranian society a fully engrained patriarchy that oppresses women at every turn.⁷⁸ In *Under the Skin of the City*, it seems unlikely that Khatami's broad discussion of civil society can undo a deeply and historically determined system of economic and gender injustice.

Housing functions as a point of access to an array of gender inequalities that rise to the surface in *Under the Skin of the City*, the most important of which is violence perpetrated against women. The film engages two acts of domestic violence that together elicit a number of practical and political responses. Hamideh, who is beaten by her husband, is forced back into the cycle of violence because Tuba must accept the fact that the family does not have space in their home to accommodate a pregnant woman and her daughter. During Hamideh's stay at the house, the film includes several shots of the interior spaces, partitioned and divided with makeshift curtains assembled from old sheets; these crowded images underscore the lack of physical space in the home. Hamideh's situation is contrasted with Masumeh, the family's next-door neighbor and Mahbubeh's best friend. Masumeh is abused by her brother, who, although a drug addict himself, beats her and cuts off her hair after he discovers that she went to a concert. Masumeh breaks this cycle of violence by running away. She and Mahbubeh later meet in Mellat Park and her style of dress and heavy makeup convey to the viewer that she is

⁷⁸ For a more detailed discussion of this novel as a feminist statement, see Kamran Talattof, "Feminist Discourse in Postrevolutionary Women's Literature," *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 135-172.

working as a prostitute.⁷⁹ When police raid the park, both girls are arrested, and Tuba is unable to bail Mahbubeh out of jail, because she no longer has the deed to the house, which she needs as collateral for the bail money. In this way, Bani-E'temad ties this social problem into the economic conditions that determine the building industry.

Tuba's son 'Ali, a young political activist campaigning for Khatami, responds to the violence against the women around him by arguing that "these sorts of things happen as long as women are ignorant of their rights." The irony and futility of this statement are rendered apparent by Tuba's lack of rights in homeownership. More than that, 'Ali's statement, which accords with the Reformist Movement's answer to women's problems,⁸⁰ encourages Iranian society to reconsider the way it thinks about women and their rights within an existing political structure rather than revising that structure as a whole. However, Tuba's dismissive reaction to her son's statement suggests that this approach is unable to accommodate practically her socioeconomic reality. And it is ultimately this reality—the experience of one family in south Tehran—that destabilizes the Reformist myth and highlights the fact that Khatami's broad vision for his country was out of touch with most of its citizens. The city of Tehran functions a particularly rich site of exploration for Bani-E'temad because its numerous bring to focus the many ways

⁷⁹ *Khabargozāri-ye Mehr* estimates that 80% of runaway girls fall victim to illegal activities, mainly in the form of prostitution and drug smuggling, within their first twenty-four hours on the street. (<http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=112382>).

⁸⁰ The feminist journal *Zanān* published an interview with Mohammad Khatami during the 1997 elections. Khatami's answers the journals questions about status of women in Iran indicate that Reformist Movement collapsed the solution to a variety of problems into the category of "civil society." For Khatami, adhering to the ideals of democracy and civil society would have a similar positive effect on the social and economic problems that plagued the country. For more, see "Khātami darbāreh-ye zanān che mi-guyad?" [What does Khatami say about Women?] *Zanān* 34 (Ordebehesht 1376): 2-5.

in which the Reformist Movement was never equipped to deal with the country's immediate, local problems. *Under the Skin of the City* was produced in 2000, at a time of growing criticism of the Reformist Movement's inability to enact broad change for a better society. I argue, therefore, that the articulation of Tuba's political aspirations in this film represents nostalgia for a lost hope, covered and obscured by the Reformist Movement's phantasmagoria.

Mapping Tehran and the Untimeliness of Documentary

The lost hope that emerges in *Under the Skin of the City* is taken up and explored further in Bani-E'temad's *Ruzegār-e mā...* [Our Times...] (2002). Identified by the Iranian journal *Film* as one of the most important cinematic events of 2002 (Jalili 2002: 18), *Our Times...* is a documentary that examines the period immediately preceding the Khatami's reelection in 2001. This film shares common concerns with *Under the Skin of the City*; in particular it represents Khatami's Reformist Movement alongside housing crises in the south of Tehran and within the context of documentary filmmaking. These points of intersection between the two films enable a productive comparison that exposes Bani-E'temad's critique of the Reformist Movement. In other words, these two films are meant to be complementary texts that work together first to reveal the political hope, necessitated by an urban experience, that underpinned the Reformist Movement's popular rise and later to reorganize one's understanding of how the Reformist Movement failed to accommodate that hope. *Our Times...* contributes to the reformist aesthetic by

underscoring the spatial and geographic features Tehran as a means of resisting the traditional chronological and temporal markers that guide a viewer's understanding of documentary. As a result of this reconfiguration of time, Bani-E'temad freezes time as a powerful statement on the Reformist Movement's inability to progress or enact reform.

Our Times... comprises two seemingly disjointed parts. In the first section, Bani-Etemad follows a group of young people campaigning for Khatami. Many Iranians were disillusioned with Khatami after his first term in office. He was unable to create the changes he had promised because his efforts were blocked by conservative forces. As a result, the young campaigners meet resistance at every turn. However, in spite of these challenges, they are ultimately successful and the film's first section ends with Khatami's re-election. In the second part of the film, Bani-E'temad tracks down the forty-eight women who had registered to run for president that year. The Guardian Council discarded their names because women in Iran, although able to run for parliament, may not seek the office of president. Bani-E'temad interviews several of them but focuses the bulk of this part of the film on one of them, a woman named Arezu. The director follows Arezu as she scourers the city looking for an apartment because she is being evicted from her current residence. Arezu's effort is complicated by the fact that she is an extremely poor, young, single mother, who has no husband to petition on her behalf. Only twenty-five years-old, she was married twice before, both times to heroin addicts. She eventually finds a new living arrangement, but the film ends as she returns to her job the next day to discover that she has been fired for missing three days of work to look for housing.

Determining a relationship between these two disparate parts represents one of the film's greatest challenges. How does one make sense of a film that begins as a documentary about the 2001 elections and ends as a documentary about one woman's attempt to find a place to live? The filmmaker, who provides *Our Times...* with a narrative voice, initially suggests a chronological structure. In a transitional scene that shows the director driving through the busy streets of Tehran, Bani-Etemad says that she is worried that her daughter will have questions that she won't be able to answer. She never identifies the nature of these hypothetical questions, but the camera continues to follow Bani-Etemad during her drive and the viewer gets the sense that she is moving forward searching for these answers.

The film's second section begins with the sound of interviews being arranged; the image shifts to an office scene before quickly returning to Bani-Etemad in her car as several more interviews are lined up by cell phone. The repeated use of footage of the director in her car suggests that these interviews, and the entire second part, take place after the car ride and therefore well after the elections. The viewer makes sense of the disjointedness of the film by constructing a chronological reading facilitated in large part by this transition. The election in the first part of the film raises questions and as a result the documentarian collects visible evidence in the second section to answer these questions. The construction of this kind of argument conforms to viewers' expectations about a documentary.

However, during the course of the second section, Bani-Etemad unravels the chronological structure that the viewer has come to accept. As the central character, Arezu, searches for a house, news of the *upcoming* elections slowly permeate the film's background. Well into her story, Arezu buys a paper and the camera focuses on the headline, which reads "A vote for Khatami is a vote for Reform." Later, a radio announces that there are "Only a few more days left until the election, and the candidates have started their campaigning efforts..." Because in Iran candidates have a limited campaigning period, this announcement suggests that perhaps the two sections of the film are not even synchronic and that Arezu's story, despite occupying the second position in the film, actually commences before the first section. The second section, like the first, ends on Election Day. As a result, the viewer is forced to recognize the overlap of time and as a result must question the argument-based structuring process that Bani-E'temad claims for her project.

In the absence of a linear structure, *Our Times*... interpretation through Tehran's topology. The city's structure depends on a spatial and social stratification that emerges along the city's horizontal axis to divide this urban space into clear north and south divisions. This division, geographer Ali Mandanipour notes, represents "the main feature of the city's spatial structure."⁸¹ The city's middle- and upper-class residents live almost exclusively in the northern half of the city, which is settled comfortably at the base of the Alborz Mountains and enjoys "a wide range of social and physical privileges over the

⁸¹ Mandanipour, *Tehran*, 114

southern half.”⁸² Geographically, these benefits include “a more diverse skyline and a degree of visual supremacy over the south,” better flood control, and a more moderate climate.⁸³ The desirability of this space means that the northern part of the city comes with “larger houses, lower densities, higher land prices, smaller households, higher rates of literacy and employment, higher concentrations of modern facilities and amenities,....more green space...a better water supply and a higher defensive value.”⁸⁴ Throughout the twentieth century, city planning efforts—lead by three consecutive governments—reinforced this divide.⁸⁵ Therefore, the affluent districts of the north and the poor districts of the south are separated by an insurmountable social and physical gap. And this polarization remains “clearly visible in Tehran.”⁸⁶

Rakhshan Bani-E’tamad’s work, as viewable medium, both captures this visually inscribed urban feature and is informed by it. While the first part of the film (about the young campaigners) takes place in North Tehran, the second part unfolds in the southern part of the city. This sets up a series of juxtapositions that confirm the visual supremacy of the North. The film’s representation of the North consists of scenes that show greenery, planned pedestrian spaces, and striking panoramic views of the cityscape. On the other hand, the film’s focus on South Tehran emphasizes the lack of green space, an absence of pedestrian resources, and the dilapidation of physical structures.

⁸² Mandanipour, *Tehran*, 111

⁸³ Mandanipour, *Tehran*, 111.

⁸⁴ Mandanipour, *Tehran*, 111.

⁸⁵ Mandanipour, *Tehran*, 113.

⁸⁶ Mandanipour, *Tehran*, 114.

These visual disparities are compounded temporally: the first section on the North of Tehran lasts eighteen minutes and the second section is three times as long. This distribution of time mimics the city's population. The North of Tehran, as a privileged area, consists of a much smaller number of people, while the South is bigger in terms of both land space and density. Although the second part of the film tells one woman's story, it is representative of a much broader experience. The social and economic struggles that *Our Times*... portrays in the south of city apply to a large number of people. However, the film's first section documents a narrow experience open to a specific class of young Tehranis who have the financial resources and support to engage in campaigning efforts. In light of the horizontal axis that the film visually and temporally sketches, it is worth reconsidering the transitional scene that connects the film's two parts. The shots of the director driving in her car, more than just representing a mystic search for the truth, suggests relocation and physical movement as she repositions her documentary subject in the South.

By laying her narrative structure over a map of Tehran's north-south divide, Rakhshan Bani-E'temad encourages a comparative perspective that illuminates how the political process that she is portraying plays out in these two districts. The northern part of the city is alive with excitement about the upcoming elections. The campaigners are engaging people in political debates; the streets are covered in posters and other campaigning materials; and there are rallies in which Khatami addresses a stadium full of supporters. Meanwhile, in the South, the candidates' campaigns have been relegated to

the background at best. They make appearances only in the form of a brief radio announcement, a newspaper headline, and a few scattered posters. The people in this part of the film are uninvolved and seemingly uninterested in the political system. For this reason, it is easy to overlook the lack of a linear chronological structure. In contrast to the heightened political activity of the first section, the political apathy of the second signals the absence of elections.

However, the most startling difference between the two parts of the city (and the film) involves the acquisition of private space. Arezu's story in the film is marked by an inability to locate housing for her family. This struggle and her frustrations are shown on screen for almost an hour. However, the first part of *Our Times...* opens with the young campaigners cleaning and setting up their headquarters. They easily secure an office on a quiet residential street to use as the base for their campaigning efforts. This space is crucial to their political participation; without it, they would be unable to organize their campaigning strategies. By the same logic, Arezu's lack of private space prohibits her political participation. Rakhshan Bani-E'temad selects Arezu as a documentary subject because she was one of the few women to register to run for president. When asked why she wanted to become president, Arezu identifies a number of social and economic problems that plague poor communities in Tehran. Ironically, she is unable to participate in the very process for which she registered. In the end, Arezu is so consumed by her search for housing that she does not even have time to vote. At once, then, her urban experience creates the need for political hope and blocks her attempts to satisfy it.

Rakhshan Bani-E'temad's geographic structure allows us to contemplate a notion of documentary time. Because documentaries construct arguments about the lived, historical world and establish what Bill Nichols calls "discourses of sobriety" that imagine their relationship to the real as "imminent,"⁸⁷ one might assume by extrapolation that documentary time is necessarily real time. However, *Our Times*...comprises two disjointed parts that overlap chronologically and refuse temporal cohesion. The film is premised on an argument and a reasoning logic that depends on linear progression that is ultimately and paradoxically unsupported by its visual evidence. This documentary's temporality is, in fact, untimely. This concept of "untimeliness" has gained moment recently in discussions of critical theory. Wendy Brown, who has played a crucial role in the articulation of this model, argues that untimeliness offers "a different sense of the times and a different sense of time"⁸⁸ *Our Times*...challenges the viewer's conception of time in order to challenge his or her understanding of the times. The film's title, *Ruzegār-e mā*...[Our Times...], plays with this idea further by serving as an umbrella category for multiple narratives that are far from unified, and the director's opening commentary emphasizes this difference. She says, "Spring 2001: Strange, stormy days. The 8th Presidential Elections in Iran. I intended to make a record of that era, but where should I start? From what point of view? Society was filled with fear and hope, doubt and trust."

⁸⁷Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 4.

⁸⁸Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15.

Brown argues that “untimeliness deployed as an effective intellectual strategy, far from being a gesture of indifference to time, is a bid to reset time.”⁸⁹ It is through her efforts to reset time that Rakhshan Bani-E’temad visualizes her critique of the Reformist Movement. By holding time still, she suggests the lack of progression, and especially improvement or *reform*. Khatami’s election to the presidency in 1997 represented more than just a change in political power; it also marked a semantic shift. Phrases like “civil society” and “democracy” replaced the revolutionary rhetoric popular in the Republic during its first twenty years. However, his first term proved unsuccessful in delivering the changes that these concepts promised. In fact, in four years, none of the country’s economic and social problems had been addressed. By holding time constant and making geography a variable, Bani-E’temad made her film undeniably local, inextricable from the very city it depicts. By fixing the viewer’s gaze on the city of Tehran, she stages a confrontation with its problems. Khatami focused much of his energy on repairing Iran’s global reputation through concepts like a “dialogue of civilizations.” However, Bani-E’temad’s film brings to focus the local economic problems that were for many Iranians more urgent.

Bani-E’temad’s effort to hold time still resonates with Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “Angel of History,” Thesis IX in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940). Benjamin imagines a construction of history in which we look backwards while being

⁸⁹ Brown, *Edgework*, 4.

propelled forward by a “storm” called “progress.”⁹⁰ Inspired by a Paul Klee painting called “Angelus Novus,” the Angel of History is caught between the momentum forwards and backwards and held momentarily at a standstill. Khatami’s Reformist Movement was similarly stuck: constantly staring back at the Revolution, unable to look away but at the same time pushed forward by its own desire to progress. Bani-E’tamad’s *Our Times...* demonstrates that for the Reformist Movement the tension between past and the future resulted in a static present.

Conclusion

Under the Skin of the City and *Our Times...* together articulate a political hope that is discovered and later lost in the urban desires that once gave force to the Reformist Movement. The almost messianic quality of the Reformist Movement that emerges when Tuba announces, “Someone has come to save us, and I am here to vote” gives way to near negation when Arezu is unable first to run for president and later to cast a vote. Rakhshan Bani-E’tamad’s cinematic unraveling of the dreams and desires that paradoxically grounded and destabilized Khatami’s movement endowed the reformist aesthetic with a new sense of space and time, wherein Tehran functions as a site of constant change and never-ending unchange. These spatial and temporal reconfigurations

⁹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Pantheon, 1968), 257.

recover economic, political, and social urgencies that exist on coordinate planes separate from a Reformist Myth.

Bani-E'temad's political assessment in *Under the Skin of the City* and *Our Times...* betrays a cinematic relationship with Mohammad Khatami and his Reformist Movement that is much deeper than just modes of critique. Both films depict and criticize the political process, and this level of representation is unprecedented in modern Iranian history. By relaxing the codes of cultural control and inaugurating artistic forums for open political debate and critique, Khatami made significant strides towards the ideals of democracy and civil society that he envisioned. Bani-E'temad's *Under the Skin of the City* and *Our Times...*—despite their criticism of the Reformist Movement—are, therefore, representatives of a group of Iranian films that participated in the formation, articulation, and propagation of a new set of political and philosophical reformist ideals.

Chapter Four

A Genre of the Second of Khordād

In 1998 eighteen-year-old director Samira Makhmalbaf, daughter of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, wowed international film audiences with her debut film *Sib* [Apple] (1998). Her presence at Cannes that year made her the youngest director ever to participate in the official section of the film festival. *Apple* tells the story of eleven-year-old twin girls, Massumeh and Zahra Naderi, who have been kept indoors their entire lives. Their parents, a blind woman and unemployed man, attempt to overcome their disempowerment by exerting excess control over their daughters' lives, and especially their access to the outside world. Concerned neighbors alert social workers, who intervene on behalf of the girls, and the film covers their entrance into the real world. *Apple*, which is based on real events and features the involved parties, examines issues of entrapment, isolation and confinement, and it considers the individual psychological effects that these modes of control impart upon their victims. For example, because of their confinement, Massumeh and Zahra have a limited ability to communicate in Persian. Instead, the girls have developed a language between themselves, a linguistic system that keeps them further isolated at the same time that it protects them. We also see the girls' reaction to seeing their reflection in a mirror for the first time, and we watch them reach for an apple on the other side of the courtyard wall, a symbol of temptation

but also freedom. All of these features in the film demonstrate the ways in which confinement has profoundly affected the formation of the girls' individual identities, both linguistic and social.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the film's writer and editor, has suggested that this individual narrative is an allegory for much bigger circumstances, and he describes the real-life events that inspired the film as "the story of our nation... We have all been kept in a cave by our fathers. We can't even look at the sun."¹ Hamid Dabashi notes that Makhmalbaf made this observation immediately following Khatami's election in 1997, and from this statement one might extrapolate that the film's hope—the fact that the girls do, in the end, see the sunlight and discover their freedom—reflects the hope of the Reformist Movement. Indeed, Dabashi claims that Samira Makhmalbaf's film "may serve as the manifesto" for the director's generation, who was deeply invested in Khatami's reforms as a post-ideological movement.² Indeed, it is the central thesis of this dissertation that certain filmmakers in Iran aesthetically engaged Khatami's Reformist Movement and transformed individualized experiences into metaphors for the hope and the disappointment that the Movement ushered into the country. In Samira Makhmalbaf's *Apple*, one can discern the contours of this reformist aesthetic, and Makhmalbaf's statement and Dabashi's interpretation point to the possibilities and insights that emerge when reform is used as a tool for analyzing a particular set of Iranian films.

¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema Past, Present, and Future* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 269.

² Dabashi, *Close Up*, 268-269.

This chapter further explores these possibilities by proposing a “Genre of the Second of Khordād,” a category of films grounded in Khatami’s unexpected victory on 2 Khordād 1376/23 May 1997. I begin with an analysis of Abbas Kiarostami’s films *Ta’me-e gilās* [Taste of Cherry] (1997) and *Dah* [Ten] (2002) and argue that the Reformist Movement significantly altered this well-established director’s aesthetic. I conclude by examining Bahman Farmanara’s *Bu-ye kāfur, ‘atr-e yās* [The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine] (2001), a film that redefines the Iranian intellectual in reformist terms. While the relationship between Samira Makhmalbaf’s *Apple* and the Reformist Movement is more contextual than textual, the films that form the basis of this chapter’s analysis are directly tied to Khatami. By focusing my analysis in this way, I hope to determine precisely the qualities of this genre and determine a reformist model that might be later applied to other films with less explicit connections to Khatami and his Reformist Movement.

Theorizing a Genre of the Second of Khordād

As Khatami’s first term came to an end, film critic Nimā Hassaninasab published an article called “Zhānr-e dovom-e khordād” [Genre of the Second of Khordād] in *Film*, Iran’s foremost film studies journal. In this article, Hassaninasab suggests that Khatami’s first term as president profoundly impacted Iranian cinema, and he notes that “everyone who has been following cinematic production for the last two decades agrees that some of the most important and successful films over the last four years were only made possible

after the appearance of the present [i.e. Khatami's] government."³ Hassaninasab provocatively proposes that these films together constitute a new genre, which he calls the Genre of the Second of Khordād. 2 Khordād 1376/23 May 1997 was the day that Khatami was elected for the first time, but that date came to represent something much bigger in Iranian society. Following Khatami's victory, he and his followers became known as *jonbesh-e dovom-e khordād* or the Second of Khordād Movement. For many Iranians, the reforms that Khatami promised represented a new beginning in the Islamic Republic, and by memorializing the date of his election in this way, this segment of Iranian society sought to reset its historical clock and generate a new starting point. Hassaninasab's clever name carries this meaning as well. The Genre of the Second of Khordād similarly functions as a new point of periodization, one that marks a new period of aesthetics. While the Second of Khordād Movement represents political change, the Genre of the Second of Khordād points to artistic innovation. Hassaninasab's classification suggests that cinema can do more than represent politics. A cinematic trend can also reshape itself vis-à-vis a particular political system.

According to Hassaninasab, the films that constitute the Genre of the Second of Khordād are bound together by their "engagement with themes that had previously been forgotten or unattainable."⁴ Broadly surveying many of the films that were released during Khatami's first term, he outlines a number of new themes, including immigration, marginalization, love triangles, and unanswered needs of the youth, but he focuses the

³ Nimā Hassaninasab, "Zhānr-e dovom-e khordād" [Genre of the Second of Khordād], 19.270 (2001), 10.

⁴ Hassaninasab "Zhānr-e dovom-e Khordād," 10.

bulk of his analysis on four areas that best represent the thematic developments in Iranian cinema during the first four years of Khatami's presidency. Hassaninasab observes that following the Revolution, the dearth of political films represented a huge absence in Iranian cinema, one that was overcome in the films released during Khatami's first term, in which one sees a rise in political content.⁵ Similarly, during this period parts of Iranian cinema began engaging critically the Iran-Iraq War. Khatami's cultural openness and the passage of time allowed filmmakers for the first time to represent the war in a critical way and especially to consider the devastating effect it had on an entire generation of young people in Iran.⁶ The Iran-Iraq War helped shape Iranian cinema in the post-Revolution period, because much of the government's support of cinema (including financial incentives and training initiatives) were initiated to create propaganda for the war efforts, intended to raise morale and support for the war. The fact that certain filmmakers go back during Khatami's presidency and rewrite the filmic history of representing this war marks a significant cinematic reform.

During these four years, Iranian cinema witnessed in unprecedented ways a corpus of stories that "engage earthly love and premarital relationships."⁷ Filmmakers had previously broached these topics, and notable examples include Makhmalbaf's *Time for Love* and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *Narges* [Narges] (1991) and *Rusari-ye ābi* [The Blue Scarf] (1993). However, this period marked the first time that the issue of love (and

⁵ Hassaninasab, "Zhānr-e dovom-e Khordād," 10-12.

⁶ Hassaninasab, "Zhānr-e dovom-e Khordād," 14.

⁷ Hassaninasab, "Zhānr-e dovom-e Khordād," 12.

especially earthly love) met popular acceptance,⁸ a radical shift from the public backlash that Makhmalbaf's *Time for Love* sparked less than a decade earlier. Increased attention on screen to social and romantic relations similarly demanded more time devoted to women on screen and the development of more complex female characters. Hassaninasab argues that the second of Khordād made possible a more diverse set of permissible female characters. He notes, for example, the shocking image of a woman holding a knife on the film poster for *Qermez* [Red] (1998) by director Fereydun Jirani.⁹ Many films from this period are interested in the daily lives of women and promote their roles within society and not just within the family. This kind of variety, which does not necessarily limit itself to the "ideal" Muslim woman, would have been problematic during the first two decades of the Islamic Republic.¹⁰

The argument that the Genre of the Second of Khordād comprises films with new set of shared concerns hinges on the notion that Khatami's liberal cultural policies made possible the rise of these thematic developments. For Hassaninasab, the Genre of the Second of Khordād offers the opportunity to consider what films are about and what their stories tell when filmmakers are less restricted in what they can and cannot represent.¹¹ In Hassaninasab's schema, the films that constitute the Genre of the Second of Khordād are tied to the Reformist Movement because they were made possible by the open cultural atmosphere that Khatami's presence created. However, the present chapter attempts to

⁸ Hassaninasab, "Zhānr-e dovom-e Khordād," 12.

⁹ Hassaninasab, "Zhānr-e dovom-e Khordād," 14.

¹⁰ Hassaninasab "Zhānr-e dovom-e Khordād," 12.

¹¹ Hassaninasab "Zhānr-e dovom-e Khordād," 10.

build on Hassaninasab's concept and incisive analysis in order to propose a broader understanding of the Genre of the Second of Khordād. This chapter argues that a Genre of the Second of Khordād, whose name is grounded in the very birth of the Reformist Movement, must be in dialogue ideologically and philosophically with Khatami and his policies. Additionally, our definition of this genre must account for more than just thematic developments, and should also attempt to delineate formal and structural changes that took place in the films that were created during this period. My analysis of two films by 'Abbas Kiarostami and one film by Bahman Farmanara will attempt to theorize the Genre according to these terms. Hassaninasab's analysis proves tremendously useful to this task because without these thematic innovations, the ideological connections and resulting structural and technological developments would have never been possible.

New Roads, New Directions

On May 18, 1997, five days before Mohammad Khatami's landslide electoral victory, Abbas Kiarostami's film *Ta'm-e gilās* [Taste of Cherry] (1997) momentarily won the *Palme d'Or* at the Cannes Film Festival. Although Iranian cinema had previously enjoyed much success at international festivals, this award marked its first major win, and it catapulted Iranian cinema and Abbas Kiarostami onto the international film scene in unprecedented ways. However, film critics and scholars soon began suggesting that the win was political, tied to the upcoming elections in Iran. Roger Ebert,

for example, wrote a critical review¹² of the film, which Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa has positioned as the critic's commentary on the political nature of the film's win at Cannes.¹³ Azadeh Farahmand similarly argues that "Kiarostami's *The Taste of Cherry* won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1997, the year that Khatami was elected Iran's president, his image as a moderate leader circulating in the western Media."¹⁴ As Hamid Reza Sadr points out, *Time* magazine further solidified the connection between Reformist politics and Kiarostami's film when it selected *Taste of Cherry* as one of the ten best films of the year and in the same issue praised Khatami for his willingness to engage in international dialogue.¹⁵ *Time's* (perhaps unintentional) suggestion that both Khatami's "dialogue among civilizations" and Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* attempted to engage Iran globally in similar ways hints at a deep ideological relationship that has yet to be fully excavated. I argue that Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*, although seemingly apolitical, reflects the philosophical crises that Khatami's Reformist Movement ultimately sought to reconcile, and the film participates in a new popular discourse that culminated with Khatami's political platform.

¹² Roger Ebert, "Review: *Taste of Cherry*," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 28 February 1998.

¹³ Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 95.

¹⁴ Azadeh Farahmand, "Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim for) Iranian Cinema," *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), 95.

¹⁵ Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 238-239. This open governmental policy, which encouraged Iran's presence at international film festivals, is in contrast to the early 1990s when religious leaders like Ali Jannati severely criticized the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance for allowing films to be shown at film festivals around the world ("Sokhanān az namāz-e jom'eh-ye Qom" [Words from the Friday Prayer of Qom], *Ettelā'āt*, 16 Esfand 1369/ 6 March 1991).

Abbas Kiarostami is one of a handful of directors who has remained steadily productive both before and after the Revolution. Born in 1940, Kiarostami came of age at a unique time in Iran's history. He was born a year before the Allied invasion of Iran and the 1950s and 1960s marked a golden age of Persian poetry in the country. Hamid Dabashi identifies the uniqueness of mid-century Iran as having a profound effect of Kiarostami's professional and artist life.¹⁶ In 1968, he enrolled in the School of Fine Arts at Tehran University, where he studied painting and design and worked as a traffic guard, no doubt influencing his cinematic interest in roads and traffic. Following his graduation, he began working in advertising, creating posters and commercials, and in 1969 he established a filmmaking department within the Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, which would ultimately produce his first film, *Nān va kucheḥ* [Bread and Alley] (1970), a twelve-minute neo-realist film about a boy's encounter with an aggressive dog. Since that time, Kiarostami has regularly released films, and his long career within Iran suggests that he is a perceptive and adaptive artist. His film *Taste of Cherry* observes and documents a society in change, as a new reformist discourse attempted to repair the discontent with the revolution that had washed over the country.

Taste of Cherry is a minimalist film that follows Mr. Badi'i as he circles the dusty outskirts of Tehran in his Land Rover. He drives almost aimlessly looking for someone to bury him after he commits suicide. During the course of his travels, he picks up three

¹⁶ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 34-44.

men: a Kurdish soldier, an Afghan seminary student, and an Azeri taxidermist. To each of his passengers, Mr. Badi'i offers a considerable sum of money to come to the grave site he has prepared for himself in order to cover him with dirt. All three men are visibly uncomfortable with the frankness of Mr. Badi'i's offer. Each passenger reacts to Mr. Badi'i differently, their responses conditioned by their varying ages and social perspectives. The young Kurdish soldier is made so uncomfortable that he just jumps out of the car while it is still moving. The seminary student attempts to dissuade Mr. Badi'i by offering Islam's perspective on suicide. The taxidermist, who is a bit older and more experienced, offers his own experiences overcoming despair in order to convince Mr. Badi'i to put off his plans and wait for something better. However, once he sees that the protagonist is unwilling to change his outlook, the taxidermist reluctantly accepts the offer so that he can pay his sick daughter's medical bills.

However, the film's final scenes unravel the certainty of Mr. Badi'i's plans. The viewer sees Mr. Badi'i outside of his car for the first time as he tracks down the taxidermist at work. Mr. Badi'i requests that the taxidermist shake and throw rocks at him to ensure that he is dead, because it is possible he will just be sleeping. This request is followed by uncertain and voyeuristic images of Mr. Badi'i's shadow in his apartment that do not clearly indicate whether or not the protagonist takes the pills to kill himself. The uncertain momentum comes to a head when the scene changes to reveal Mr. Badi'i lying in his uncovered grave, and the viewer is confronted with the possibility that he or she may never fully know whether or not Mr. Badi'i actually killed himself. However,

the film abruptly destabilizes the viewer's investment in Mr. Badi'i's decision when Kiarostami calls cut and the actor playing Mr. Badi'i stands up and begins interacting with the film crew. This coda powerfully reminds the viewer of the film's fictionality, and it accords with other efforts by Kiarostami, in which he draws attention to cinema's delicate balance between fiction and reality.

Despite this point of consistency between this film and Kiarostami's previous works, *Taste of Cherry* also marks a significant departure from the director's earlier aesthetic. These points of difference coincide meaningfully (and not coincidentally) with features of the Reformist aesthetic that I have described so far. In particular, *Taste of Cherry* was unique at the time of its release for its urban focus. Kiarostami's neorealist style had previously depended on and drew inspiration from rural environments and settings. However, with *Taste of Cherry* the director reorients his camera to an urban perspective as he maps a set of concerns specific to a Tehran-based intellectual class. Additionally, although Kiarostami has a longstanding interest in the journey as a narrative strategy, *Taste of Cherry*'s emphasis on the circular journeys is unique to this film and central to its examination of an urban intellectual class. These circular journeys, which differ from the more linear-based treks that defined Kiarostami's earlier films, resonate with the Sufi journeys popular in Iranian cinema in the early 1990s.

Although these aspects of the film play into a larger Reformist aesthetic, the film *further*s our understanding of a Genre of the Second of Khordād by representing two of the Reformist Movement's sociopolitical projects. In this section, I argue that *Taste of*

Cherry participates in the global transmission of culture (through film festivals like Cannes) while also stressing the importance of this kind of exchange. I similarly suggest that the film addresses the Reformist Movement's most basic philosophical question: how does one reconcile a revolutionary and Islamic political system with more tempered reformist democratic ideals? This argument hinges on the idea that both *Taste of Cherry* and Mohammad Khatami's Reformist Movement are reactions to popular concern in Iran in the late 1990s, and as such they are products of a particular socio-political moment and ideologically tied to one another.

Scholars have paid great attention to Kiarostami's use of the journey as a narrative structure.¹⁷ Most of these analyses aptly draw attention to the Persian poetic tradition and the significance of the quest to Sufi philosophical thought. Film critic Godfrey Cheshire, for example, draws on the ideas of Iran scholar Henry Corbin, to trace Kiarostami's allegorical journey back to the eleventh century. He contends that Persian philosophers and poets at that time found themselves at a crossroad between East and West and their respective esoteric and empirical modes of thinking. It was in this context, Cheshire claims, that the quest became a spatialized metaphor for the philosophical inquiry and traversal of new geographies and worldviews.¹⁸ The implication of

¹⁷ See, for example, Geoff Andrews, *10* (British Film Institute, 2005), Godfrey Cheshire, "How to Read Kiarostami," *Cineaste* 25, no. 4 (2000), 8-15; Edmund Hayes, "10 x Ten: Kiarostami's Journey into Modern Iran" (openDemocracy, 2002): <http://www.opendemocracy.net/content/articles/PDF/815.pdf>; Laura Mulvey, "Repetition and Return," *Third Text* 2, no. 1 (January 2007), 19-29; Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 18-19; Khatereh Sheibani, "Kiarostami and the Aesthetics of Modern Persian Poetry," *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 4 (2006), 509-537.

¹⁸ Cheshire, "How to Read Kiarostami," 13

Cheshire's argument is that the journey is a means through which Kiarostami navigates through and reconciles western and Iranian modes of storytelling, and the corollary of this conclusion is the importation of a western aesthetic onto an Iranian form in Kiarostami's films.¹⁹

David Orgeron significantly moves beyond the unilateral limits of the crossroads metaphor and instead casts Kiarostami's films and specifically *Taste of Cherry* into a different kind of traffic terminology. He suggests that *Taste of Cherry* promotes cultural exchange as a two-way street.²⁰ Building off of Kiarostami's famous 1992 claim that films rank among pistachios, carpets, and oil as Iran's most significant exports,²¹ Orgeron argues that the "language of imports and exports...is the language of traffic," and "*Taste of Cherry* clearly testifies against the one-way movement of this traffic."²² Although *Taste of Cherry* might, as Kiarostami's critics have claimed, qualify as "export-ready," it is also "a film about reclaiming or returning to the local and the dangers of a culture that too readily embraces 'exports.'"²³

Orgeron underscores global cultural transmission in *Taste of Cherry* by drawing our attention to a particularly witty moment in the film. Mr. Badi'i chats with a man whose job is to collect empty plastic bags in the dusty wastelands outside of Tehran. The

¹⁹ It is worth noting that Babak Fozooni makes a similar argument in his article "Kiarostami Debunked!" *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 2, no. 2 (2004), 73-89. In less spatial terms, he identifies those features of Kiarostami's filmmaking that are Iranian and those that are "European."

²⁰ David Orgeron, *Road Movies: From Muybridge and Méliès to Lynch and Kiarostami* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 194.

²¹ Miriam Rosen, "The Camera of Art: An Interview with Abbas Kiarostami," *Cineaste* 19.2-3 (Fall 1992), 40.

²² Orgeron, *Road Movies*, 194.

²³ Orgeron, *Road Movies*, 194

man's shirt clearly reads U-C-L-A. This moment in the film clearly draws the viewer's attention to the far-reaching power of American culture. After all, even a trash collector in an abandoned construction site outside of Tehran carries a proclamation of American culture on his person. But Orgeron also aptly notes that this moment in the film "is also a reference to the film-school culture that has deemed Kiarostami auteur of the moment."²⁴ This example highlights for Orgeron *Taste of Cherry*'s commentary that displacement and dislocation are regular features of the human condition. The journey—and traffic in particular—becomes within this order an attempt to overcome this social, spatial, and temporal detachment by enabling social, cultural, and, I would argue, political relations and communities.

Orgeron sees the isolation born of Kiarostami's "mournful journeys" as representative of a broad category of human alienation. However, it is possible to narrow Orgeron's theoretical framework to suggest that *Taste of Cherry*'s treatment of alienation is a cinematic recreation of the sense of isolation that Iran was experiencing in the late 1990s. Mohammad Khatami's political platform, which sought to appeal to and engaging with a global community, appealed to an Iranian populous that had grown discontent with the isolating policies created first by the Revolution and later by the establishment of the Islamic Republic. As I shall demonstrate, Khatami's concept of a "Dialogue among Civilizations," presented to the United Nations for the first time in 1998, conceives of intercultural exchange in terms similar to Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*.

²⁴ Orgeron, *Road Movies*, 195.

Mohammad Khatami's address to the UNESCO Roundtable on the "Dialogue among Civilizations" on September 5, 2000 represents one of his most pointed descriptions of this concept, which he introduced to the United Nations two years earlier. During this speech, he aims to outline the "historical, theoretical, and, for the most part, non-political grounds for the call to dialogue among civilizations."²⁵ Khatami begins his speech by highlighting Iran's "exceptional" geographic location, a position that has put the nation "on a route of political hurricanes as well as pleasant breezes, of cultural exchange and also venues for international trade."²⁶ Like *Taste of Cherry*, Khatami offers a spatial model for understanding and encouraging cultural, political, and economic exchange. He likens the "movement of ideas and culture" to the natural and persistent "migration of birds."²⁷ This focus on movement, the transmission of culture and ideas, recalls a statement that Kiarostami made about the representations of the journeys in his films. He said, "The journey is very important to me... you don't know how far they go... where they lead, and you don't know where they end. But it's important just to be moving." In this schema, movement becomes a means through which connections are made and ground—whether physical or metaphoric—is traversed.

In the absence of global dialogue, Khatami warns of the imminent possibility of "cultural homelessness," which would "deprive people of solace both in their own culture

²⁵ Mohammad Khatami, *Address to the UN ESCO Roundtable on Dialogue among Civilizations*, September 5, 2000 (<http://www.unesco.org/dialogue/en/khatami.htm>).

²⁶ Khatami, *UNESCO Address*.

²⁷ Khatami, *UNESCO Address*.

and in the vast open horizon of global culture.”²⁸ His speech thereby touches on the same anxieties about isolation and dislocation that Kiarostami’s film represents. As a way past this sense of alienation, Khatami suggests that we “seek new ways for human life” by aiming for a “meta-historical discussion of eternal human questions.” This kind of discourse, Khatami proposes, will allow us to move beyond the “historical horizon” that all human beings “inevitably” inhabit. He offers “the ultimate meaning of life and death, goodness and evil” as two possibilities.²⁹ Significantly, *Taste of Cherry* creates a sense of empathy regarding issues of life and death, and transmits Iranian attitudes towards suicide to a global audience.

Azadeh Farahmand argues that Kiarostami’s films allow Western audiences to remain “cold, detached observers” by forcing identification with a “middleman,” whose own distance from the film’s subjects protects the viewer “from any shock, unpleasant encounter or guilty conscience.”³⁰ However, *Taste of Cherry*, which repeatedly places the viewer in the middle of conversations about suicide, overturns Farahmand’s theory and suggests that the opposite may be true. Far from being absolved of a guilty conscience, the viewer of *Taste of Cherry* is traumatically reminded of his or her lack of agency with regard to Mr. Badi’i’s suicide. Throughout the film, the camera’s position, which switches between the driver’s seat and the passenger’s seat, puts the viewer in the middle of the exchanges about suicide that take place between Mr. Badi’i and his passengers.

²⁸ Khatami, *UNESCO Address*.

²⁹ Khatami, *UNESCO Address*.

³⁰ Farahmand, “Perspectives on Recent (International Claim for) Iranian Cinema,” 101.

Because the audience never gets much information about Mr. Badi'i or his motivations, the viewer is made to identify with the various passengers. As a result, the viewer is forced into the uncomfortable and passive position of knowing about Mr. Badi'i's suicidal plans but remaining unable to intervene. This filming technique, which inserts global audiences (through events like film festivals) in the middle of Iranian discussions about life and death, serve Khatami's call for a dialogue about the "fundamentals," a discussion that will replace "misunderstanding and confusion" with "empathy and compassion."³¹

Khatami stresses the role of the artist in intercultural dialogue and the creation of empathy and compassion. He praises artists for not seeing "the sea, mountain and forest as mere mines and sources of energy, oil and fuel." According to Khatami, "artists engage in dialogue within and through the sacred language of spirit and morality" and their "language has remained safe from the poisonous winds of time," even in "a world...thoroughly controlled by political, military and economic conditions."³² Art is therefore at the center of Khatami's call to global dialogue and artists on the frontline of this exchange. Hamid Reza Sadr suggests that Khatami's "strategy was no secret: he wanted to use cinema, sport and other cultural avenues to improve the country's standing."³³ Sadr further indicates that filmmaking, which had been "nurtured by Khatami" during his tenure as Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance was at the

³¹ Khatami, *UNESCO Address*.

³² Khatami, *UNESCO Address*.

³³ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 238.

forefront of this process. Certainly, *Taste of Cherry*'s success at the Cannes Film Festival participated in cultural exchange, both by touching international audiences and clearing the way for future successes on the international circuit. The film's participation in international festivals also foresaw a kind of cinematic cultural exchange that would be more clearly developed in subsequent years.

In his article, "Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning: New Cinemas and the Film Festival Circuit," Bill Nichols writes specifically about post-revolutionary Iranian cinema in order to chart the experience of discovering "new cinemas" on the international film festival circuit. He likens film festival audiences to "tourists," who are encouraged to "submerge" themselves in "strange worlds," in which they listen to "unfamiliar languages" and observe "unusual styles."³⁴ This act of submersion, Nichols argues, initiates a process of "recovering the strange as familiar," which consists of two parts: "discovering form" and "inferring meaning."³⁵ While the former might include formal innovations or the degree to which a film conforms to or rejects the standards of Hollywood, the latter engages "insights or lessons about different cultures."³⁶ The effect of this process is that "festival-goers...experience a precarious, ephemeral moment in which an imaginary coherence renders Iranian cinema no longer mysterious but still less than fully known."³⁷ Nichols' theorization of the film festival experience confirm the

³⁴ Bill Nichols, "Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning: New Cinema and the Film Festival Circuit," *Film Quarterly* 47.3 (Spring 1994), 17.

³⁵ Nichols, "Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning," 18.

³⁶ Nichols, "Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning," 18.

³⁷ Nichols, "Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning," 27.

tenets of Khatami's "Dialogue among Civilizations," in which he identifies art as a crucial means through which cultures might make themselves more fully known to one another.

There is historical evidence to suggest that filmmakers and enthusiasts picked up on Khatami's recommendation for a dialogue among civilizations. The Search for Common Ground (SFCC) organized a "US-Iran Cinema Exchange" in 1999 with the collaboration of Iran's House of Cinema. The meetings to plan this exchange took place in Cannes in 1998 and 1999, and there is a clear geographic—and also an implicit philosophical—connection between these meetings and Kiarostami's win in 1997. Planners identified a number of events in both Iran and the United States at which Iranian and American representatives would be present. While the impact of such an exchange on cultural dialogue is clear, the political exchange it facilitated is also noteworthy. As a part of the agreement, both parties agreed to facilitate entry visas, the US agreed to waive finger-printing for participants, and the possibility of equipment donations made through a third party was also suggested.³⁸ Azadeh Farahmand suggests that these exchanges were "timely tools...for easing tension, and brining Iran-US contact to the surface through...a neutral and cultured medium."³⁹ These successful exchanges were the culmination of Mohammad Khatami's call to international dialogue. At the same time, they were enabled by Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*, which promoted two-way exchange

³⁸ Farahmand, "Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim for) Iranian Cinema," 97.

³⁹ Farahmand, "Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim for) Iranian Cinema," 97.

through its representation of journeys and also brought Iranian cinema to international recognition with its participation in and success at important film festivals.⁴⁰

As previously suggested, *Taste of Cherry* engages a fundamental question about the meaning of life and death. Because of the universality of this issue, scholars have thoroughly examined the film as a philosophical statement that engages the fleeting nature of human life, and they have made connections to the commentaries on death in the literature of Iranian authors like ‘Omar Khayyam and Sadeq Hedayat.⁴¹ The Iranian government also took this candid discussion of suicide at face value. Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad indicates that the film’s coda, which shows the actor who plays Mr. Badi’i standing up from the grave and interacting with Kiarostami, was a move on the director’s part to appease censors, who otherwise saw the film as promoting suicide.⁴² However, despite this kind of scholarly and governmental engagement with the film’s representation of life, death, and suicide, *Taste of Cherry* betrays a sense that the issue of suicide is less the thrust of the film and more of a means through which Kiarostami probes a cross section of society. In other words, certain moments in the film suggest that Mr. Badi’i’s suicide is being *used* to access something bigger.

⁴⁰ It is important to note that Kiarostami’s position on the front line of this kind of artistic exchange has opened him up to criticism. In particular, scholars have argued that Kiarostami’s efforts promote western cultural imperialism rather than introducing modes of cultural exchange. For an incisive report of this line of criticisms by Hamid Dabashi and Massud Farasti, see Mottahedeh’s *Displaced Allegories*, 93-96.

⁴¹ See, for example, Godfrey Cheshire, “How to Read Kiarostami,” *Cineaste* 25.4 (2000): 8-15; Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, trans. Belinda Coombes (London: Saqi Books, 2005); Julian Graffy “*Taste of Cherry/Ta’am-e gilās*” *Sight and Sound* 8.6 (June 1998), 57; Jonathan Rosenbaum, “Fill in the Blanks” *Chicago Reader*, 29 May 1998; and Khatereh Sheibani, “Kiarostami and the Aesthetics of Modern Persian Poetry,” *Iranian Studies* 39.4 (2006): 509-537.

⁴² Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Society and Film in the Islamic Republic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 149.

Laura Mulvey identifies this feature of the film in her discussion of Kiarostami's "uncertainty principle." She describes this 'uncertainty principle' as the way in which the director creates an aesthetic that is built on an assumption that "the spectator's desire know and understand is heightened by a conscious sense of uncertainty about even the truth or reality of what seems to be happening."⁴³ Mulvey notes that Mr. Badi'i's story literally *drives* the narrative forward, but the viewer is left with the impression "he—or Kiarostami—might be undertaking the whole exercise as a social experiment."⁴⁴ She attributes this impression to the opaqueness of the film's main character and the obscurity of his reason for suicide. Certainly the lack of information that the viewer gets about Mr. Badi'i contributes to this overall sense.

However, there are also moments in which Kiarostami wryly casts doubt on both his own and the main character's intentions. For example, the seminary student invites Mr. Badi'i to eat with him and a friend who has prepared a meal. Mr. Badi'i declines the offer by saying, "Thank you! I know he's cooked but eggs are bad for me. Some other time! Goodbye!" Both Mr. Badi'i's concern for his health and his look to the future undermine and contradict the conversation he has just had about his upcoming plans to kill himself and the seminary student's beliefs about suicide. Later, as Mr. Badi'i is driving the taxidermist to work, he pulls out into traffic. His passenger yells, "What's wrong with you? Are you in a hurry to die?" At this point in the film, the viewer is well aware of the fact that Mr. Badi'i is actually in a hurry to die. By including this line in the

⁴³ Laura Mulvey, "Kiarostami's Uncertainty Principle." *Sight and Sound* 8.6 (June 1998), 25.

⁴⁴ Mulvey, "Kiarostami's Uncertainty Principle," 26

film, Kiarostami positions the forthcoming suicide as joke-worthy, thereby lessening the severity or seriousness or the film's supposed premise.

These ironic moments in the film invite the viewer to think outside of the narrative structure (i.e. Mr. Badi'i's plans to kill himself) and contemplate a set of concerns related but not necessarily directly tied to the conversations that take place between the film's protagonist and his various passengers. These counter examples to Mr. Badi'i's suicidal plans indicate—without necessarily devaluing the significance of the life/death discourse that the film establishes—that something else is at play with regard to the discussion of suicide. I argue that *Taste of Cherry* is, as others have suggested, a philosophical inquiry but its stakes are not necessarily life or death; instead, the film undertakes the same philosophical project as Mohammad Khatami's Reformist Movement, attempting to reconcile a body of inherited policies with a contradictory set of future desires.

Taste of Cherry's premise—a man looking for someone to bury him after he has committed suicide—offers a rather interesting paradox within an Iranian-Islamic context. On the one hand, suicide is considered a grave sin according to Islamic law, a fact emphasized in the film by the seminary student. A person who takes his own life is denied passage into paradise. On the other hand, burial is a rite of *passage* according to Islamic tradition and functions as one step in the process of gaining entrance into paradise. Whether or not someone who has committed suicide is eligible for a proper burial remains a topic of debate within Islamic jurisprudence, and there are a number of

hadiths that indicate that during his own lifetime the Prophet Mohammad refused to perform funeral prayers for individuals who had committed suicide.⁴⁵ *Shari'a* or Islamic law constitutes a spectrum, wherein mandatory and lawful actions (*halāl*) constitute one end, prohibited actions (*harām*) form the other end, and in between are actions, which are to varying degrees desirable or undesirable. Mr. Badi'i's goal, suicide and burial, create tension between these two ends of the spectrum, and his foresight and intentionality strike the viewer as particularly strange.

Ultimately, it is the tension that arises from Mr. Badi'i's two-part pursuit (his suicide and subsequent burial) that cinematically recreates the Reformist Movement's most fundamental philosophical concern. Mohammad Khatami's moderate political platform, which encouraged concepts like global engagement, civil society and the rule of law, was in constant tension with the revolutionary system of governance that he both inherited and helped create. Olivier Roy, for example, argues that the biggest task that Khatami and his supports faced was secularizing a political system within a society that is culturally and socially invested in "its heritage and origin: an Islamic Revolution."⁴⁶ He also claims that in broader terms Khatami's election brought to light "contradictions" about the relationship between religion and politics in the Iranian constitution.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ F. Rosenthal, "Intihār," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2011, (http://www.brillonline.nl.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-3581).

⁴⁶ Olivier Roy, "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran," 53, no. 2 (Spring 1999), 215.

⁴⁷ Roy 202

The contradictions in Khatami's political philosophy extend beyond the constitution itself and reach to his own leadership style. Keyvan Tabari notes that one of the great "paradoxes" of Khatami's leadership, and especially his promotion of a rule of law, was that he claimed an "open mind" while also working from the seat of a system that limits political participation to those individuals "who pass a strict loyalty test."⁴⁸ Khatami's support of the Islamic Republic (as a governing system), the Iranian constitution, the *velāyat-e faqih*, and the at times the *basij* did not readily accord with his promise of open democracy and civil society. Indeed, Abdolkarim Soroush, who, according to Roy, provided a philosophical framework for Khatami's early work⁴⁹, criticized Khatami for these contradictions. Soroush argues that Khatami's "practical vacillation" was the result of "theoretical vacillation."⁵⁰

These paradoxes, contradictions, and vacillations would ultimately open Khatami up to criticism. However, at the time that he was elected in 1997 (just days after *Taste of Cherry*'s win at Cannes), the possibility of reconciling these competing desires brought hope to Iranian society.⁵¹ Khatami's promise to pay homage to the Revolution of 1978-

⁴⁸ Keyvan Tabari, "The Rule of Law and the Politics of Reform in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *International Sociology* 18, no. 1 (March 2003), 112.

⁴⁹ Roy, "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran," 215

⁵⁰ Abdolkarim Soroush, "Interview with Dariush Sajjadi" on Homa TV March 9, 2006, <http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-HomaTV.html>.

⁵¹ Even in his criticism, Soroush notes the hope that Khatami's election brought to Iranian society. In a letter to Khatami, he says, "the peaceful and democratic uprising of the Iranian people against religious dictatorship in May 1997 was a sweet experience... But your failure to keep the vote and your wasting of opportunities put an end to it and disappointed the nation. Now, failures have turned into unrest." For more, see "Khatami Threatens Resignation Over Power Struggle with Hard-Liners" *The Daily Star*, July 17, 2003 (http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/News_Archive/E-NWS-20030714-Khatami_Threatens_Resignation-The_Daily_Star.html).

1979 while also moving the country forward appealed especially to a sense of stagnation and revolutionary discontent that came to a head in the country in the late 1990s. *Taste of Cherry*'s great success is conveying this sense of stagnation while attempting to navigate through it. Like the Reformist Movement in 1997, the film attempts to represent the challenges of overcoming one's own history and suggests hope for the future. Within the film, this process is largely abstract, in the same way that the Reformist Movement and its initiatives were largely an abstraction at this point, and it is for this reason that *Taste of Cherry* forms an integral part of a Genre of the Second of Khordād.

Taste of Cherry constructs tension visually and conceptually through its representation of journeys. The film's visual structure depends on medium-shots of Mr. Badi'i's Land Rover circling through the dusty outskirts of Tehran. These shots, which show the car making small circles and big circles, punctuate the main character's various conversations. In his study of the film, Marco Della Grassa has carefully charted the moments of silence and dialogue in the film and provides the following breakdown:⁵²

⁵² Cited in Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 124.

Silence	8:14
Dialogue	17:35
Silence	6:42
Dialogue	16:09
Silence	5:46
Dialogue	14:08
Silence	6:06
Dialogue	1:00
Silence	10:24

Alberto Elena suggests that this schema is a meditative structure that forces the viewer to contemplate on the nature of the discussion that has just unfolded.⁵³

However, Elena's explanation alone does not account for the images that the viewer sees on the screen during these contemplative periods, and he does not explain how these visual clues impact the viewer's meditation. A substantial portion of the moments of silence is devoted to shots of Mr. Badi'i circling. The film's visual structure is in direct contrast with its narrative. The film's dialogue, which focuses heavily on suicide, establishes a life-death continuum that forms a linear structure, intersecting and overlapping the visual structure's circularity. The journey to death as a linear process is underscored by the taxidermist, who warns, "Life is like a train that keeps moving forward, and then reaches the end of the line, the terminal. And death waits at the terminal." The character's use of a transportation metaphor is significant, because it

⁵³ Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 124.

encourages a comparison with the circular journey that the car literally makes as he speaks.

As previously suggested, the film's circular movements reference a Sufi journey, a quest whose destination ultimately becomes the experience of movement itself. However, *Taste of Cherry*'s circularity also signifies Iranian history and especially the ways in which Iranian society has perceived its own history. One of the products of Iran's very long history is the cultural discernment of certain patterns and cycles. We might, for example, consider the fact that Iran's nationalist discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century formed around revivals of the country's pre-Islamic history and fixated on the fall of the Sassanian Empire after the Muslim conquest in 644.⁵⁴ Similarly, Ayatollah Khomeini cast Iran's participation in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) in terms of the Battle of Karbala, a seventh-century event that foreshadowed the division between Sunni and Shi'is and during.⁵⁵ In addition to these revival efforts, there is a sense of repetition in Iran's modern history. The twentieth-century Iran experienced two revolutions, first the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911) and later Islamic Revolution (1978-1979).⁵⁶ By the late 1990s, there was concern that the most recent revolution had failed to deliver on its promises, and there was also growing frustration that the country was stuck in cycles of political turmoil that failed to create change. A sense of stagnation

⁵⁴ For more, see Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 77-95.

⁵⁵ Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in post-Revolution Iran* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 44-75.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

emerged from this cyclical history and made popular the revolutionary discontent that began developing the time of Makhmalbaf's *Time for Love* and Dariush Mehrjui's *Hāmun*.

Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* conveys this sense of stagnation to the viewer. Certainly, the tension between silence and dialogue (outlined above) contributes to this overall feeling. The long periods of silence encourage contemplation at the same time that they make the viewer restless and uncomfortable. The film also visually constructs stagnation with its setting, the function of which is never made entirely clear. This dirt-filled space might be a construction site. We see heavy machinery, but piles of dirt are the only things being moved around or constructed. At one point, Mr. Badi'i gets out of his car and the viewer only sees his shadow. A dump truck backs up and dumps a pile of dirt onto the shadow. The shot widens, and Mr. Badi'i is covered in a cloud of dirt. Both he and his shadow are effectively buried. It is possible to read this scene as foreshadowing Mr. Badi'i's suicide and his burial. However, a more fitting interpretation at this point in the film might stress the feeling of being buried alive, which captures the sense of futility that arose from the stagnation that Iranian society experienced at this time. Mr. Badi'i stresses this feeling during his discussion with the seminary student. He says, "There comes a time when a man can't go on. He is exhausted." The character's sentiment resonates with the discontent of a generation, the origins of which we saw in films like *Hāmun* and *Time for Love*.

The film's minor characters also contribute to the film's representation of stagnation and ineffectiveness. Mr. Badi'i's first passenger, the Kurdish soldier, suggests that he is in a rush to return to the barracks. However, after a series of follow-up questions, the soldier admits that he is hastily making his return even though he is not required to report back for duty for at least another hour. Mr. Badi'i points out the ridiculousness of rushing back only to wait. The film's protagonist often seems to be in the position of pointing out the characters' inefficiency. At one point, he chats with an Afghani laborer, whom he invites for a ride in his Land Rover. However, the worker claims that he cannot leave his post even on a holiday, because he must ensure that no one steals the machinery. Mr. Badi'i points out that the machine he is guarding is so big that no one could possibly steal it. However, the Afghani worker insists that he must remain in his watchtower. The film's main character also chats with a Lor,⁵⁷ who collects plastic bags around the construction site. When Mr. Badi'i asks him for a favor, the Lor replies, "I just collect bags." The man walks away and the title sequence begins. The ethnicity of these characters is significant. In this film, Kiarostami maps Iran's ethnic and cultural diversity, and he gives particular weight to those groups that have been marginalized. By showing these marginalized groups in the context of futility, the director demonstrates how far this sense of stagnation reaches. He positions it as a national condition.

⁵⁷ The Lors are an ethnic minority in Iran who hail from the southwest part of the country. They speak Lori, a language that is closely related to Persian.

The hope of the Reformist Movement—or perhaps the *myth* of the Reformist Movement—arose from a desire on the part of Iranian society to overcome this stagnation. By the mid-1990s, Iran found itself stuck in the historical circles that the film *Taste of Cherry* so powerfully depicts. Khatami’s reformist platform offered a way out of this circular pattern by changing the popular discourse in the country. He offered a new vocabulary for discussing the changes that might help Iran to realize fully its Islamic Republic, a set of terms that stressed the “republic” and built on the Islamic foundations put in place by Khomeini. *Taste of Cherry* picks up on this willingness to contemplate past decisions. The wise taxidermist, for example, tells Mr. Badi’i, “You think something is good, and then you realize you’re wrong. The main thing is to think hard. You believe what you do is right but then you realize it is wrong.” Throughout *Taste of Cherry*, Mr. Badi’i’s fixation on suicide as a “way out” is analogous to Khatami’s promise to guide Iran to reform. As Mulvey and others have indicated, the character’s interest in suicide functions more on the level of theory than praxis, and I argue that the discussion of suicide in the film allows Kiarostami to convey cinematically a longing for a “way out” that has a broader appeal to Iranian history at this particular junction (i.e. during and preceding the 1997 elections).

However, the *Taste of Cherry*’s complexity emerges when one attempts to trace this metaphor to some end. The film features two narrative layers: one aural and one visual, one linear and one circular. It suggests that the linear journey between life and death might offer some reprieve from the circular patterns that haunt Iran’s modern

history. And yet the film confounds its own philosophical reasoning when the taxidermist says, “Of course, death is a solution but not at first, not during your youth. Forgive me for dragging you off along this rocky road.” This statement throws doubt on the linear progression as a “way out” and redeems the circular journey as hopeful. The “rocky road” is a reference to a point earlier in their conversation when the taxidermist tells Mr. Badi’i to take an alternative route to the city. When Mr. Badi’i says he does not know the way, the taxidermist replies, “I know it. It’s longer but better and more beautiful. I’ve been a prisoner of this desert for 35 years.” In this way, the film advocates the *reform* that Khatami’s movement promised rather than *revolution*. In other words, the taxidermist’s monologue, which is so powerful it causes Mr. Badi’i to contemplate his plans, suggests that it is not necessary to reorganize conceptually one’s journey; sometimes the longer and more beautiful route is the way out. Khatami’s Reformist Movement similarly acknowledged Islamic Republic’s youth—at that point not even twenty years—and sought to work within the existing structure rather than completely shifting gears and advocating for another revolution.

The power of the taxidermist’s monologue is revealed in the film when Mr. Badi’i begins doubting his plans. Although no other character is able to sway his beliefs on suicide, after his conversation with the taxidermist, Mr. Badi’i changes his tone significantly to suggest that he may not kill himself at all, that he might just be asleep in the grave. The film ultimately positions hope outside of the linear journey to death and redeems the circular journey. For the viewer, who at this point is invested in the

characters' decisions, the possibility that Mr. Badi'i might spare his life and continue driving in circles is hopeful. As the next chapter will more fully demonstrate, reform has been a similarly a circular concept in Iran's modern history, and *Taste of Cherry* locates hope in the reformist cycles at this historical juncture. Tehran has functioned as a physical manifestation of the country's reformist efforts, a feature stressed in the previous chapter and one that I will examine in the next chapter as well. One of *Taste of Cherry*'s final scenes shows Mr. Badi'i moments after his conversation with the taxidermist, in which he casts doubt on his plans to commit suicide. He meaningfully stares at the Tehran skyline as the sunsets. This scene, colorful with the sun's final moments in the sky, is strikingly different from the rest of the film, which is literally brown with dirt. Several cranes are at work in the center of the skyline, reminders of the patterns of construction and deconstruction that define Tehran. The bright colors and the crane revive the possibility of hope and of reform. Although *Taste of Cherry* never fully advocates either, the brief possibility acts a momentary reprieve from the film's otherwise heavy stagnation.

Abbas Kiarostami's *Dah* [Ten] (2002) picks up on *Taste of Cherry*'s reformist aesthetic and contributes further to our understanding of a Genre of the Second of Khordād. Like *Taste of Cherry*, *Ten* was released in the context of one of Khatami's campaigns, this time shortly after his reelection in 2001. Not surprisingly, then, with *Ten* Kiarostami returns to and expands upon many of stylistic and contextual features that made *Taste of Cherry* so successful. This film also marked Kiarostami's reentry onto the

international film festival scene. After his success with *Taste of Cherry*, Kiarostami stated that although film festivals had played an important role in supporting his work, that phase in his life was over.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, he screened *Ten* at Cannes in 2002, where it received little attention. This movie also represents Kiarostami's return to an urban space. After *Taste of Cherry*, Kiarostami released *Bād mā rā khvāhad bord* [The Wind Will Carry Us] (1999), which takes place in a Kurdish region of Iran and conformed more closely to the director's previous rural aesthetic. However, *Ten* is firmly rooted in the streets, concrete, and traffic of the capital city.

Ten comprises a series of ten discussions between Mania Akbari, a real-life visual artist and photographer, and various passengers as she drives around Tehran. The movie takes place entirely within the confines of her SUV, and the most striking similarity between the *Ten* and *Taste of Cherry* is Kiarostami's use of the car as a narrative device. *Ten* was shot with two digital video cameras posted on the dashboard, one in front of the passenger's seat and the other in front of driver's, and I will discuss this digital innovation in more depth later. We only see footage from one of these cameras at any given time, and Kiarostami carefully controls the viewer's access to images of the characters. For example, during the first sixteen-minute sequence, the viewer is unable to see the driver. Instead, we only see her ten-year-old son, with whom she is arguing. Because we only see the son and his uncomfortable movements as he accuses his mother

⁵⁸ Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 254, n. 97.

of being selfish and loving no one but herself, we are made to identify with him.⁵⁹ This strategy puts the viewer in the uncomfortable position of identifying with a boy who uses what Alberto Elena calls “verbal violence” to berate his mother.⁶⁰ As a result, the viewer grapples with and challenges this identification, and Geoff Andrew suggests that Kiarostami’s use of this technique encourages active viewing.⁶¹

Each of the ten sequences in *Ten* begins and ends abruptly, and as Andrew Ganz and Lina Khatib have pointed out, Kiarostami does not adjust the camera’s zoom, so each passenger fills the frame differently,⁶² a feature that adds to the movie’s overall choppy feel. *Ten*’s various sequences form a countdown that begins with ten and ends with one. This structure creates the impression that the movie is building up to something, that Akbari’s SUV has a final destination. However, the final sequence (number one), which is the movie’s shortest, simply repeats images and scenes that the viewer has already seen.

Like *Taste of Cherry*, *Ten* establishes tension between circular narratives and linear through repeated images and confined spaces on the one hand and by structuring a descending numeric sequence on the other. As Negar Mottahedeh notes, the repetition of dialogues, images, and long gazes within a confined space “becomes tedious,” and *Ten*

⁵⁹ Adam Ganz and Lina Khatib, “Digital Cinema: The Transformation of Film Practices and Aesthetics,” *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 4, no. 1 (2006), 31.

⁶⁰ Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 178.

⁶¹ Geoff Andrew, “10,” (London, BFI: 2005).

⁶² Ganz and Khatib “Digital Cinema,” 31.

“appears to have nothing worth watching.”⁶³ Mottahedeh’s observation suggests that this movie deceives its viewers by offering very little on the surface. However, “the audience’s predictable fatigue soon turns into a stimulating intellectual and emotional participation in [a] new game.”⁶⁴

Alberto Elena incisively determines that “*Ten* is a film whose relevance within the director’s career will probably take some time to determine with any accuracy.”⁶⁵ By considering *Ten* vis-à-vis a reformist aesthetic, we might shed light onto the movie and its position within Kiarostami’s larger body of work. An examination of *Ten* also allows us to better understand reform as an aesthetic movement in Iranian cinema. In particular, it brings into focus the ways in which reform literally re-formed the conventions of Iranian cinema in post-Khomeini Iran.

Scholars have noted that *Ten* diverges from Kiarostami’s previous works with its focus on the condition of Iranian women.⁶⁶ Indeed, the director has been criticized for rendering women absent from most of his films. He has explained his lack of attention to women’s issues by pointing to the codes of censorship that limit how he can represent women on screen, and he claims that he does not “give any false impressions” that grow out of these restrictions.⁶⁷ He later admits this omission as a mistake, one that he redeems

⁶³ Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 138.

⁶⁴ Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 175.

⁶⁵ Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 175.

⁶⁶ Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 176, Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 138, Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic* (London: Routledge, 2010), 125.

⁶⁷ Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 176.

in *Ten* by “giving a realistic picture of the Iranian middle-class woman as she actually is.” He says, “I can assure that it is all very true to life...In other Iranian films there is always someone who goes around adjusting the women’s headscarves just before they start filming, but that is frankly the death of cinema.”⁶⁸ His observation about women’s scarves serves as a clear reference to the rule that all women must be properly veiled whenever on screen, even in scenes that depict their private lives where they would not normally be required to cover. Certain films meaningfully draw the viewer’s attention to the cinematic absurdity that this rule creates. For example, Tahmineh Milani’s *Afsāneh-ye āh* [Legend of a Sigh] (1991) features a scene in which a young woman springs from bed already wearing her scarf.⁶⁹

In *Ten* Kiarostami chooses to navigate around this trap by confining the narrative space to a car’s interior, a scenario that he believes more closely approximates women’s reality. Just as in Bani-Etemad’s *Under the Skin of the City*, *Ten* establishes the car as a specialized space, bound by its own rules and regulations. While *Under the Skin of the City* brings to focus the car as a source of social and economic mobility, *Ten* identifies the car in Iranian society as a semi-privatized space, susceptible to certain public laws, like those that dictate the modesty of one’s clothing, but private enough for intimate

⁶⁸ Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 176.

⁶⁹ It is interesting to note that in 2010 Abbas Kiarostami released a French film called *Copie Conforme* [Certified Copy]. Produced entirely outside of Iran, the film shows how Kiarostami works when he is unrestricted by the rules and regulations that determine Iran’s film industry. The film is a light romantic comedy starring Juliette Banoche, who won Best Actress at Cannes for her work in the film. *Certified Copy* is a radical departure from the director’s previous work, which is contemplative and serious, and always creates tension in terms of gender, either by including or excluding women. In *Certified Copy*, Kiarostami brings a whole new aesthetic, which demonstrates the degree to which Kiarostami’s cinematic vision is very much the product of the film industry in which he works.

conversations and sometimes transgressions of normal gender relations. Adam Ganz and Lina Khatib argue that *Ten* is different from other films about women that were released in Iran at the turn of the twenty-first century, because it gives the audience “direct access” to a woman’s space, and this perspective radically alters the relationship between object and subject. Its lack of wide shots ultimately creates a spatialized female intimacy that other Iranian films fail to achieve.⁷⁰

While scholars have been quick to recognize the shift in Kiarostami’s work to include the representation of women, a trend that begins in *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) and culminates with *Ten* (2002), little attention has been paid to the reasons for this considerable move. Why, after almost thirty years in the film industry,⁷¹ does Kiarostami choose to shift his focus to include women’s issues at this particular juncture in history? In the same way that *Taste of Cherry* and Mohammad Khatami’s Reformist Movement react in kind to the stagnation that weighed heavily on Iranian society in the mid- to late-1990s, *Ten* similarly responds to growing social concern, in step with the

⁷⁰ Ganz and Khatib, “Digital Cinema,” 30.

⁷¹ Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum note that the absence of women in Kiarostami’s works began even before his work with films. A significant portion of his pre-revolutionary commercials, produced between 1960 and 1969, exclude women. These two film critics offer two reasons for the absence of women in the director’s works. In the pre-revolutionary period, he might have been “resisting the exploitation of women in advertising,” whereas in the post-revolutionary period, he “had censorship to worry about” (68). However, these explanations too willingly divide Iran’s history and Kiarostami’s body of work into two disjointed period, a categorization that overlooks the fact that Kiarostami is one of the few directors to be successful both before and after the Revolution. In my opinion, the benefit of Saeed-Vafa’s and Rosenbaum’s discovery about the role of women in Kiarostami’s early commercial work is that it suggests a pattern that is not necessarily tied to what Hamid Naficy refers to as the Islamization of film culture in Iran. The consistency of Kiarostami’s omission over a considerable amount of time begs even further the question: why now?

Reformist Movement as it became less a philosophical venture and more invested in particular social issues.

Farzin Vahdat suggests that “considerable attention” to women’s participation in Iranian society was a “distinctive characteristic” of Khatami’s platform.⁷² During his presidency, in step with concepts like civil society, democracy, and human rights, Khatami addressed the oppression of women and even criticized the *faqih* [Islamic Jurist] as “not just” given its historical context.⁷³ In 1997 he famously stated that “women and men are different, but women are not the second sex and men are not superior.”⁷⁴ In 2000 Khatami published a book called *Zanān va javānān* [Women and Youth], in which he stresses the significance of engaging both women and young people in systems of governance. He argues that one role of government is to facilitate women’s recognition of “their rights and capabilities” and to allow them to “acknowledge their merits.”⁷⁵ With this statement, he moves beyond the previously held notion that men, and their government in particular, must guard women. As a result of this progressive thinking, the feminist magazine *Zanān* [Women] was a major supporter of Khatami during both of his elections. During his presidency, what appeared to be women’s reform marked the streets of Tehran, and the enforcement of dress codes was relaxed considerably (and visibly).

Press restrictions were also relaxed, and in 1998 the secular, feminist journal *Jens-e*

⁷² Farzin Vahdat, “Religious Modernity in Iran: Dilemmas of Islamic Democracy in the Discourses of Mohammad Khatami,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 25.3 (2005), 660.

⁷³ Vahdat, “Religious Modernity in Iran,” 660.

⁷⁴ Mohammad Khatami, “Women and Men are Different, but Women are not the Second Sex and Men are not Superior,” *Zan-e ruz* 143 (1997), 8-10.

⁷⁵ Mohammad Khatami, *Zanān va javānān* [Women and Youth] (Tehrān: Tahr-e no, 2000), 40.

dovom [Second Sex] received a permit for publication. Khatami also established a Center for Women's Participation, which was lead by Vice President Zohreh Shoja'i and encouraged the formation of women's-based NGOs.

At the same time, there was an explicit paradox in Khatami's line of thinking with regard to women. He notes the special status of woman in the home, and family, her role as model in private space, and the paradox, he claims, emerges when one considers whether this special place in the home will marginalize her in society.⁷⁶ Khatami calls on Iranian society to contemplate, "how we can have women in the public sphere without the disintegration of the family?"⁷⁷ However, during his presidency, he never succeeded in solving this paradox.⁷⁸ He was also unable to overcome conservative forces to achieve the level of women's rights that he promised. Most notably, he failed to get the Guardian Council to ratify the UN Convention of on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which was the same fate as many of the bills in support of women's rights that the sixth *Majlis* (2000-2004) passed. Despite—or perhaps because of—these failures, Khatami's presidency brought discussions about women's rights in Iranian society to the forefront in unprecedented ways.

Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* functions as a response to this heightened discourse about women. It critiques the status of women during Khatami's presidency, and more specifically it challenges the policies that regulated the representation of women and their

⁷⁶ Khatami, *Zanān va javānān*, 32.

⁷⁷ Khatami, *Zanān va javānān*, 33.

⁷⁸ Vahdat, "Religious Modernity in Iran," 660.

condition on screen. The film's penultimate (1:24) segment is especially poignant in this regard. Mania converses with her friend, whom the viewer meets in earlier sequences. The friend has grown dependent on a man who refuses to marry her, a fact she has finally accepted. Mania comments that the woman's veil is particularly tight, a fact that the viewer has already recognized based on earlier images of her. Mania jokes, "Are you modest? Why is your veil so tight? It doesn't suit you." This observation triggers a minute-long scene in which the viewer is uncomfortably forced to watch the friend as she plays with her scarf, slowly pulling it off to reveal that she has shaved her head. By any measure, this scene is powerful and shocking, but especially within the context of post-Revolution Iranian cinema, in which even the slightest transgression in women's clothing is perceived as a potential national threat.

In this scene, we watch as Kiarostami (and the actress) unexpectedly and blatantly violate the law, and at the same time we are forced to witness the women's vulnerability: her shaking hands as she adjusts her scarf, her uncertain laugh as Mania interrogates her about cutting her hair, her tears, and ultimately her bald head. The mid-shot image, generated from a mounted, stationary camera, refuses to change its perspective or alter its focus to provide the viewer with some visual relief. Instead the viewer remains an uncomfortable voyeur for a relatively long stretch of time. This scene violates the laws of on-screen modesty at the same time that it challenges them. At the center of the law requiring women to veil is a belief in the tantalizing power of a woman's hair. In *Ten a*

woman unveils but she has no hair, and this image draws attention to and undermines the very foundations that ground the laws that regulate women's public appearance.

Negar Mottahedeh positions *Ten* as a “feature-length coda” to Kiarostami's work, which, she argues, constantly points to the process of filmmaking. As a postscript to such a collection, *Ten* acts as a representation of the condition of making films in the post-Revolutionary period. She claims that the movie exposes in the director's body of work an “attempt to allegorize the restraints and the possibilities of cinematic enunciation under the stringent laws dictating modesty in the Islamic Republic.”⁷⁹ Certainly, the movie's penultimate scene reveals this critique of the film industry and underscores the perils of navigating the standards of modesty that the Islamic Republic has determined for the industry.

It is significant to note that Mohammad Khatami, in his role as Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance, played a crucial role in establishing the post-Revolutionary film industry, which is inextricably tied to the films of Abbas Kiarostami. Indeed, shortly after Khatami began his tenure as Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance in 1982, the Ministry was charged with enforcing a set of guidelines that governed the exhibition of film and video. These regulations demanded that films represent “chaste” women who participate in society while raising “God-fearing and

⁷⁹ Mohttahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 139.

responsible children,” and directors must not use women to “arouse sexual desires.”⁸⁰

Khatami’s ministry was charged with interpreting these ambiguous guidelines, and at that time the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance prescribed the “commandments for looking (*ahkām-e nigāh kardan*),” which took the shape of “laws that enforced the veiling of Iranian women from their male counterparts both on and in front of the screen.”⁸¹

Kiarostami’s *Ten*, as a statement on the process of filmmaking, points to this history and Khatami’s legacy within it, especially with the scene in which a woman unveils herself on screen. *Ten* effectively creates tension between the open discourse about women’s rights and the contradictions of the laws of modesty that determine the very shape of women on screen and the nature of film industry as a whole. In this way, the movie highlights the contradictions of Khatami’s leadership (presidency and ministry) in the Islamic Republic by drawing attention to the incongruity between his presidential policy towards women and his profound impact on the film industry. The tension that *Ten* creates ultimately points to the paradox of Khatami’s thinking with regard to women, the challenge of reconciling woman’s specialized role in private space with her right to function openly in public spaces. Like Khatami’s Reformist Movement, *Ten* never provides a solution to this paradox, and as such it cannot officially be part of a film industry that demands women’s modesty. *Ten* was the first film by Kiarostami to be

⁸⁰ Hamid Naficy, “Veiled Vision/Powerful Presence: Women in Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema,” *In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-revolutionary Iran*, eds. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 138.

⁸¹ Mohttahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 9.

banned by the Islamic Republic, and it marked the first time that the director openly criticized regulations on the film industry.⁸² In an interview with Shahrām Tābe’ mohammadi in 2000, Kiarostami confirmed his belief that filmmakers ought to work within the codes of censorship.⁸³ *Ten* therefore demonstrates a notable shift in the director’s attitude towards the film industry, and this shift was a direct corollary of the paradoxes of Mohammad Khatami’s Reformist Movement and especially its policies regarding women.

Ten’s relationship to the Reformist Movement is less direct than we see in the films of Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, which explicitly depict Mohammad Khatami and the Reformist Movement. Instead, *Ten* and *Taste of Cherry*, released immediately before and after Khatami’s two elections, are tied to the Reformist Movement with their ability to capture an atmosphere of socio-political concern to which Khatami’s movement was similarly reacting. As a result the films intervene philosophically on behalf of and in opposition to the tenants of the Reformist Movement. However, *Ten*’s social critique also furthers our understanding of the Genre of the Second of Khordād and demonstrates how the reformist aesthetic transformed the shape of movies in Iran and restructured the industry as a whole. Specifically, *Ten*’s innovative use of digital video cameras and footage has had a profound effect on the Iranian cinema, and it has reconfigured what it means to operate within the regulations of the Iranian film industry. It is not surprising

⁸² Zeyadabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema*, 125.

⁸³ Shahrām Tābe’ mohammadi, “Hargez film-e siāsi nakhvāham sākht: goft-o-gu bā ‘Abbās-e Kiārostami,” *Film* 19.254 (2000), 44.

that Kiarostami's first foray into digital video, which in and of itself is a democratizing form because of ease of access, occurred in *Taste of Cherry*. The footage at the end of the film, which unravels the narrative the film has constructed, was shot using a digital camera. And as Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum have noted, the journalistic-quality of this footage opened Kiarostami up to censure by critics who believed this technology to be unbecoming of Kiarostami's art-house style.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, *Ten* takes this new medium to a new level and is shot entirely with the use of digital video cameras. Kiarostami's short movie *10xTen* (2004), originally intended to be an extra on the French DVD of *Ten*, takes place in the dusty setting of *Taste of Cherry* and represents the director's most pointed commentary on the digital form and its effect on his transforming vision for Iranian cinema. In *10xTen*, Kiarostami advocates for the use of digital forms, because they make possible the "disappearance of direction." He claims that the digital camera, small and sometimes concealable, encourages the "artist to work alone again," which in turn invites "new discoveries."⁸⁵ And as Andrew Ganz and Lina Khatib notes, the digital camera "continues looking when the film camera averts its gaze," and it "does not attempt to frame the action but only cover it."⁸⁶ However, the disappearance of direction does not mean the disappearance of the director, and *Ten*'s 90 minutes were fashioned from over 23 hours of raw footage

⁸⁴ Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, 100-101.

⁸⁵ Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 180.

⁸⁶ Ganz and Khatib, "Digital Cinema," 26.

gathered over several days. Kiarostami whittled the movie's shape and controlled precisely what the viewer sees and hears.

The farer-reaching effect of Kiarostami's digital innovation in *Ten* is the reinvention and addition of industries and the creation of new aesthetics.⁸⁷ Digital technology allows Iranian artists to override the censorship process, which regulates every step of filmmaking in the country. As director Samira Makhmalbaf has noted, the only way to film using expensive 35mm equipment is to rent it from central authorities, which requires approval and constant guidance. However, digital video only requires preliminary approval.⁸⁸ The result is that films like *Ten* drastically diverge from their original scripts. And as Geoff Andrew suggests, digital technology "empowers" world cinemas like Iran, because it allows directors to "tell their own stories" rather than imitate the forms and styles that Hollywood promotes.⁸⁹ New forms naturally burst from this empowerment, and Kiarostami states that "with 35mm there is an expectation for you to tell a story. But with digital, I think we'll get used to new styles, so maybe we don't need to rely so much on stories."⁹⁰ This impetus to experiment, the commitment to re-form, is a critical aspect of the reformist aesthetic, and one that I explore further in Chapter 5.

⁸⁷ Ganz and Khatib "Digital Cinema," 28.

⁸⁸ Ganz and Khatib, "Digital Cinema," 29.

⁸⁹ Andrews, 10, 13.

⁹⁰ Andrews, 10, 35.

Death of the Filmmaker

In 2000 Bahman Farmanara, a contemporary and friend of Abbas Kiarostami, released *Bu-ye kāfur 'atr-e yās* [The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine]. The film marked Farmanara's long-awaited directorial return to Iranian cinema after an absence of nearly a quarter-century. *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine*, a relatively short film (93 minutes), is interrupted midway by a two-minute clip of Khatami giving a speech. The main character, played by Farmanara himself, watches the president on TV and the film's viewer is made to watch with him. The mise-en-scène signals a complicated relationship between Khatami and Farmanara, and it positions the film as an important and defining part of the Genre of the Second of Khordād. Farmanara lies on his couch listening to Khatami and above him hangs a picture of a man in Qajar attire whose face has been erased. The informed viewer immediately recognizes the man in the picture as *Shāzdeh Ehtejāb* [Prince Ehtejab], the title character in modernist novel published by Hushang Golshiri in 1969. Farmanara made his second feature-length film and a name for himself in Iranian cinema by turning the novel into a successful film in 1974. The picture hanging over the director's head in *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine* bears striking resemblance to the original cover of the book and the movie poster, and its presence creates an interesting tension within the film.

While watching Farmanara's most recent film, the viewer is confronted with evidence from the most successful film from his early career. The director's cinematic career is literally sprawled out on screen and Khatami's voice resonates in the

foreground. This moment in the film indicates that Khatami and his movement are impacting the director's career and shaping his film *as we watch it*. By keeping Khatami on screen for over two minutes, Farmanara does more than simply reference Khatami's Reformist Movement; he also provides the viewer with a sample of the president's philosophies that informs how the viewer experiences the remainder of the film.

Certainly, *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine* benefited from Khatami's administration. Farmanara's requests for permits had been denied previously, and he received his first permit to direct within the Islamic Republic during Khatami's presidency, no doubt a direct result of the relatively liberal cultural environment that was fostered at that time. However, as I demonstrate in this section, *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine* is also interested in the Reformist Movement's role in redefining the intellectual figure in post-Revolution Iranian society. It is the film's exploration into the evolving character of the Iranian intellectual that makes its relationship with the Reformist Movement ideological rather more than practical.

Because *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine* is largely autobiographical, a fact reiterated by the director's role as the main character, who is also named Bahman, the basic facts of his life prove useful to the present analysis of the film. Bahman Farmanara was born in 1942 in Tehran and studied film first in London and later at the University of Southern California. He returned to Iran in the mid-1960s and began working for Iranian national television, first promoting art films on the network and later directing short films himself. His first feature film *Prince Ehtejab* (1974) won critical and

popular acclaim and instantly solidified the director's place as a serious filmmaker in Iran's New Wave. Farmanara followed *Prince Ehtejab* with *Sāyeh 'hā-ye boland-e bād* [Tall Shadows of the Wind] (1978), also based on a story by Golshiri. Like his first film, *Tall Shadows of the Wind* was and continues to be controversial and features a scene that juxtaposes images of a mullah praying and a man masturbating. A year later the Revolution halted Farmanara's directing career and he and his family eventually settled in Canada, where he successfully ran a film distribution company. His work took him to Los Angeles, where he lived for a brief period of time, before returning to Iran in the mid-1980s to deal with family issues. He decided to remain in Iran rather than return to his work in Los Angeles, because his family's textile business was in need of leadership.

Almost immediately, he began to submit scripts to the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance, a necessary first step in the process of obtaining a permit to make films in Iran. However, until *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine*, all of his scripts were denied a permit, and Farmanara has suggested that authorities took particular offense to his representation of Islam in *Tall Shadows of the Wind* and they were suspicious of the fact that he was successful before the Revolution and left immediately after it.⁹¹ The director worked as a producer and taught in the Cinema Department at the Arts University in Tehran while continuing to submit scripts. Shortly after Khatami's election, the complex system of censorship in Iran loosened slightly, and the process no longer

⁹¹ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 124-129.

required the submission of scripts for preliminary approval.⁹² Nevertheless, Farmanara continued to submit his scripts as a precaution, worried that the films would later be denied a permit. Hoping to capitalize on Khatami's election, he submitted a particularly political script that was denied a permit. However, his next proposal, a film about a dying director who wants to make a documentary about his own death, unexpectedly received a permit, and that film would ultimately become *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine*. Since then, Farmanara has directed three other films: *Khāneh 'i ru-ye āb* [A House on Water] (2001), *Yek bus-e kuchulu* [A Little Kiss] (2005), and *Khāk-e āshnāi* [Familiar Soil] (2008).

The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine is an autobiographical exploration of mourning, disillusionment, and the fate of intellectualism within Iran. It tells the story of Bahman Farjami, a director who has not made a film in over twenty years. Farmanara plays the role of Farjami himself, and the similarities between the director's name and the character's are striking. The name Farjami literally means "concluding" or "near the end," and this clever naming adds to the overall sense of death that pervades the film. Farjami suffers from a heart condition and his death is imminent. On top of that, he mourns his wife, who died five years earlier, and his colleagues and friends, who have all died recently, but more than anything, he mourns his life, his failures, and his career as a filmmaker. The film is divided into three acts: a Bad Day, Funeral Arrangements, and Throw a Stone in the Water. In between each of these acts are scenes of Fajāmi sitting on

⁹² Dabashi, *Close Up*, 135.

a train traveling to some unknown destination. The progression of acts coupled with Farjami's name and travel indicates that for Farmanara, like Kiarostami, the journey to death functions linearly. This understanding of death is reaffirmed in the film when characters refer to birth and death as arrival and departure respectively.

Like *Taste of Cherry*, *The Smell of Camphor*, *the Scent of Jasmine* is a philosophical inquiry into perceptions of life and death, and it falls into the category of art that Khatami describes as addressing "eternal human questions." *The Smell of Camphor*, *the Scent of Jasmine*'s investment in Khatami's "Dialogue among Civilizations" is also conveyed filmically through its main narrative device. Throughout the film, Farjami claims that he is making a documentary about funeral rituals in Iran for Japanese television, an enterprise that no one questions because these kinds of intercultural exchange had become increasingly common at this time. However, the documentary serves as a front that Farjami uses to gather the resources he needs to create a meta-film about his own funeral. By arranging the funeral and the details of the film, Farjami attempts to exert control over his final act, both in terms of execution and representation. However, after a heart attack and near-death experience, Farjami reassesses the value of life, and the momentum of the film's final act is driven by doubt about whether or not Farjami can call off the funeral/film that he has arranged for himself.

As the preceding summary suggests, *The Smell of Camphor*, *the Scent of Jasmine* is very much a personal narrative of mourning. Hamid Dabashi notes that the director

“does not recognize that he is making a public spectacle of his mourning...precisely at a historical juncture when the mutation of his personal creative ego into a public wake is no longer acceptable.”⁹³ Dabashi’s observation that Farmanara introduces his private mourning to a public forum is incisive, and the film reveals its personal and autobiographical nature at several points. Farmanara puts himself in the role of the main character, whose name is nearly identical to his own.

In addition to referencing the height of his career with the picture of *Shāhzdeh Ehtejāb*, Farmanara also alludes to the beginning of his career. He played a small role in Ebrahim Golestan’s masterpiece *Khesht o āyeneh* [Brick and Mirror] (1965), which is about a taxi driver who discovers an infant in the back of his car. The taxi driver spends most of the film trying to find the baby’s mother, and he encounters cynicism at every turn. In *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine*, Bahman Farjami picks up a woman walking by herself, and when she exits the car, she leaves behind her stillborn child in a plastic bag. While in *Brick and Mirror*, the baby ultimately becomes a symbol of hope, a positive force in the taxi driver’s life, in *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine*, the baby is another source of mourning; it is the death of a long but unproductive career.

The film also mentions the recent deaths and funerals of directors Bahram Reypur, Hajir Dariush, Jajal Moqaddam and Sohrab Shahid-Saless, all of whom were Farmanara’s friends and colleagues. The presence of these deceased directors within the film’s text leads Dabashi to label the film as a public means through which Farmanara

⁹³ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 249

privately mourns his colleagues, a format that no longer has relevance in Iranian society.⁹⁴ However, I argue that *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine* offers a broader applicability, and the deaths of these renowned directors come to symbolize within the film's context the death of a certain kind of intellectualism. The film brings to focus the futility of an entire generation of artists and intellectuals, disempowered by a new governance system that evaluates their work according to new terminology and a new set of standards. Indeed, after mentioning the deceased directors, Farjami describes the present environment, saying "When a filmmaker doesn't make films or a writer doesn't write that is death. In fact, I am not afraid of dying, I am afraid of living a futile life." This well-known line from the film captures the anxiety of a generation of intellectuals, who were prolific and celebrated before the Revolution but unable to continue their work after the Revolution.

The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine's representation of the defeat of the intellectual recalls the figurative bleeding out of the intellectual in Dariush Mehrjui's *Hāmun* a decade earlier. What distinguishes *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine* is the ultimate resurrection of the intellectual in the film and during the period of Khatami's presidency. If the film had stopped at Farjami's *farjām*, his end, then it might have fallen into Dabashi's categorization, too narrowly focused to appeal to a society no longer invested in that dying intellectual generation. However, the film features Farjami's funeral, wild and out of control, unlike anything that he had planned. Farjami is present

⁹⁴ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 249.

as both a participant (i.e. the deceased) and an invisible observer, unable to change the camera angles or stop people from crying. A phone call announcing the birth of Fajāmi's grandson interrupts dismantles the procession. The funeral disappears—it has never happened—and Farjami is imbued with new hope and a desire to return to his childhood and to nature. Farmanara explains the name of the last act, "Throw a Stone in the Water" as a reference to a quotation from Kafka: "When you throw a stone in the water, you can't control the waves." The film ends with Farjami throwing a stone into water, and Farmanara has suggested that this act is a statement: "I am alive. I am back and I am going to keep working."⁹⁵ This ending suggests the possibility of working within the existing structure of the Islamic Republic and participating in a new kind of intellectualism.

This conclusion to *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine* does not strike the viewer as unreasonable, because the film provides the information and tools necessary to reconstruct (or reform) the intellectual figure. Khatami and the Reformist Movement play a significant role in this process and function as representative examples of the new Iranian intellectual. And at the same time the film provides counterexamples to this model and examines the real-life fate of those intellectuals unwilling or unable to repurpose themselves and conform to the new standards of intellectualism in the Islamic Republic. In his analysis of *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine*, Hamid Dabashi, recognizing Farmaara's strengths as a director, also criticizes the film because it attempts

⁹⁵ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 146.

to mutate the “creative ego” of “old-fashion intellectuals” into “collective will,” an effort that is unable to account for the changes in Iranian society that were conditioned by the “rapid globalization of all national interests.”⁹⁶ However, as I demonstrate, Dabashi overlooks the fact that Farmanara’s film agrees that “old-fashioned” intellectualism no longer has a function in Iranian society, and the film identifies Khatami’s Reformist Movement as a site of new and emerging modes of intellectualism in post-Revolution Iran.

In an interview with Dabashi, Farmanara explains that after the Revolution everything in Iran became politicized. Before the Revolution, intellectuals were especially political. After the Revolution, the spread of politics into almost every aspect of life demanded the democratization of intellectualism.⁹⁷ This democratization in turn required that the intellectual be well-versed in and sympathetic to a number of different modes of thinking, not just one’s own ideological belief set. Farmanara indicates that the need on the part of intellectuals to access broader sources of information is represented in the film with the use of newspapers. At several points in the film, we see references to conservative newspapers. Characters read them and they are on display on tables and desks.

The most notable example is *Keyhān*, a newspaper that is under direct control of the Supreme Leader and one of the most influential publications in Iran. Even though Farjami is represented as an artist and intellectual, a director with a demonstrated

⁹⁶ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 249

⁹⁷ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 153

knowledge of both Western and Iranian thought and a flawless American accent, conservative newspapers like *Keyhān* appear on his coffee table. And this moment in the film suggests the need for the intellectual to “foster a much wider connection.”⁹⁸ While this detail may seem small, it is unprecedented in Iranian cinema, and Farmanara notes, “It is like a bombshell” that “young people will notice.”⁹⁹

Khatami similarly promoted broader connections through the press. Indeed, one of his major contributions to the country during his first few years as president was a rapid liberalization of the press. Almost immediately following his election, the Khatami’s administration made it easier for Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance to issue press permits, and within the first year of Khatami’s presidency, 779 new press permits were issued, which raised the total number to 930.¹⁰⁰ In other words, there was approximately a 500% increase in press permits and press activity in one year. However, like many of Khatami’s initiatives, this one was thwarted by conservative forces, which had grown resentful of Khatami’s relationship with the press.¹⁰¹ Beginning in 1999 and continuing in 2000, the *Majles*, lead by speaker Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, passed a series of laws that limited freedom of press and initiated the closure of several prominent reformist newspapers. The 1999 closure of *Salām*, the most popular reformist newspaper at the time, prompted student demonstrations that were violently squalled. This incident, which remains one of the greatest blemishes on Khatami’s presidency, calls attention to

⁹⁸ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 153.

⁹⁹ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 153.

¹⁰⁰ Adam Tarock, “The Muzzling of the Liberal Press in Iran,” *Third World Quarterly* 22.4 (2001), 590.

¹⁰¹ Tarock, “The Muzzling of the Liberal Press in Iran,” 585-602.

the contentious nature of the press in Iran at this time. In *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine*, which was released in the wake of these battles, the subtle use of newspapers is a reminder of the debates over open press and significance of this issue to the Reformist Movement.

In contrast to the more restrained use of newspapers in the film, Farmanara's inclusion of a video clip of a speech by Khatami forcefully draws the viewer's attention to the Reformist Movement. In *Under the Skin of the City*, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad also uses a real Khatami speech; however, she uses just the sound bite in order to contrast Khatami's words with images from the street. In contrast, Farmanara inserts an entire video clip, and the effect of this technique is that the viewer is made to watch and focus on the video of Khatami without additional visual stimulus. The intensity of the presentation of Khatami in this manner signals the importance of his speech to the film. Khatami argues that "the fate of the social aspect of religion will always depend on our viewing of religion in such a way that it is compatible with freedom." With this statement, he establishes the necessity of multidisciplinary thinking when it comes to the study and practice of religion.

Khatami studied western philosophy at the University of Isfahan and then undertook traditional seminary training Qom. He thereby embodies the coalescence of two different modes or styles of thinking. Certainly, his attempts introduce democracy, civil society, and the rule of law into Islamic thinking mark a significant step in the effort to bring together different beliefs and ways of thinking. This endeavor was one of the

great philosophical contributions to Iranian society, and the view of religion as something that can be pitted against or reconciled with freedom also harkens back to Abolkarim Soroush's ideas that were discussed in Chapter Two of this study, wherein religious knowledge is a manmade tool through which humans approximate and access religious truth to the best of their abilities.

Within the scheme that Khatami describes, freedom is the undisputed champion in human societies. He says, "If you read the pages of history, you will notice that anything that has confronted freedom has suffered in the process...If religion has confronted freedom, it has been damaged. If justice has confronted freedom, it has been damaged, and if development and construction have confronted freedom, they too have been damaged." Khatami cites two examples to make his point that to challenge freedom is to dismantle one's own cause. His first example is "from the Middle Ages when religion and freedom confronted one another, and religion suffered the defeat. The other one is from the world of Communism in our age, when economic justice and freedom confronted one another and justice lost, even though the people might not have gained their freedom either." These two examples both reference ideologically closed periods, in which political systems did not accommodate freedom and consequently suffered. The irony of this speech in the film is that viewer watches it as Farjami lies motionless on his couch, unable (as in lacking the freedom) to work and direct films. Nevertheless, the film is positing Khatami as a new brand of intellectual, who works within different theoretical

frameworks and brings together different types of knowledge and ideologies in order to appeal to broad, popular audiences.

While *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine* positions Khatami as the new intellectual, it also considers the fate of those intellectuals who were unable to work within the new structure of the Islamic Republic. One of the film's most daring aspects is its direct, though subtle, reference to the *qatl' hā-ye zanjireh 'i* [serial murders], the name given to a number of unexplained murders of dissident intellectuals in the late 1990s.¹⁰² These intellectuals were, by and large, what remained of the generation of pre-Revolution intellectuals, who were deeply ideological and usually socialist or communist. In the film, one of Bahman Farjami's friends, presumably a fellow intellectual, disappears for several days. When he returns, he has been badly beaten and he eventually dies. In the several years following Khatami's election, a number of intellectuals, artists, writers, and translators and their families suffered similar fates or suffered other violent deaths.

The unexplained murders of intellectuals in the Islamic Republic began as early as 1988, in a fashion strikingly similar to murders carried out by SAVAK, the Shah's intelligence and security agency, in the decades before the Revolution. However, the murders gained unprecedented momentum and organization once Khatami was elected president. This connection between the escalating murders and Khatami's new leadership

¹⁰² For more see Shirin Ebadi with Azadeh Moaveni, *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* (New York: Random House, 2006), 128-141.

lead some people to the conclusion the murders were directly related to Khatami's victory and a backlash against his cultural liberalism.¹⁰³

The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine furthers our understanding of the Serial Murders as a reaction to the Reformist Movement at the same time that it criticizes the nation for enabling such defiant and violent acts against the basic tenants of human rights. In the film, Farjami is flipping through the channels on TV and he stops at a report on violence in Sierra Leone. The program shows images of the mutilated bodies of Sierra Leoneans, and explains that rebel forces cut off the arms and/or feet of those captured individuals who support the current president. The report condemns the acts of violence as "medieval" and inhumane. Farjami changes the channel and begins watching Khatami's speech. The implication of the sequencing of these two videos is clear: the violence perpetrated against supporters of Iran's current president (Khatami) is just as brutal and inhumane as the political violence in sub-Saharan Africa.

The reference to the Serial Murders has very little bearing on the narrative development in *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine*. However, it does provide further evidence that the old style of intellectualism, tied to a single ideology and directed at an elite class, simply cannot function within the Islamic Republic. Although more horrific, these deaths evoke the same feeling of death that has gripped Bahman Farjami because he cannot work. The Serial Murders are tragically part of the dismantling of the

¹⁰³ Douglas Jehl, "Killing of 3 Rebel Writers Turns Hope into Fear," *New York Times* 14 December 1998 (<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/14/world/killing-of-3-rebel-writers-turns-hope-to-fear-in-iran.html?src=pm>).

old style of intellectualism in Iran. The new intellectualism, which emerges from the remains of the old, is born of figures like Khatami, who work with Islam and within the structure of the Islamic Republic, and seek reform and not revolution. Bahman Farmanara advocates this kind of intellectual work in *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine* when Farjami discovers new inspiration to work within his confinements. As Farmanara suggests, the film's ending recognizes that "this hand has been dealt to us. What are we going to do? Either we are going to roll with it and try to make something positive out of it, or we can bang our heads against a brick wall..."¹⁰⁴ In this way, the film attempts to participate in the Reformist Movement's effort to rethink what it means to be an intellectual in the Islamic Republic.

Conclusion

The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine's investment in a reformist aesthetic involves more than just participation in the redefinition of the Iranian intellectual. The film also suggests the ways in which new mediums were reforming the film industry and democratizing filmmaking in Iran. Like Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* and *Ten*, Farmanara's film also plays with the possibilities of video as a new way of making movies in Iran. Shortly after Khatami's election, Farmanara submitted a script for a highly political film called *I Hate Kiarostami*, a title intended to throw off censors. The director thought that he might be able to capitalize on Khatami's victory, but the script

¹⁰⁴ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 146.

was rejected. Farmanara was particularly upset by that rejection and concerned that he may never work as a director in Iran again, because he was denied permission even after the country's most moderate president was elected into office. In response, Farmanara wrote a synopsis for a script about a dying director who has been refused permission to direct but decides to make a movie about his own funeral using a video camera, because such a movie would not require permission from the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance. He claims that he submitted the synopsis "as a joke," and much to his surprise, the Ministry asked for a full script, which ultimately earned Farmanara a permit to begin work on *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine*.¹⁰⁵

Although *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine* was shot using 35mm cameras and is technically a film, it represents video as a medium full of possibility, and just as Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *Under the Skin of the City* is a narrative film about documentary filmmaking, *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine* is a film about video-making. As Farjami arranges his funeral and enlisting producers and actors, he constantly faces questions about his permit. Each time he must explain that he did not finally receive a permit but is making a documentary for Japanese television. However, the Japanese documentary is just a front; and Farjami really intends to videotape his own funeral. The act of preparing for the video, of serving as the director, ultimately helps revive Farjami's hope. Within *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine*, digital video functions as a possible for new intellectualism, a new source of productivity and broad

¹⁰⁵ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 135.

appeal. It is possible to suggest that the Genre of the Second of Khordād with its attention to digital medium offers filmmakers a new means of working within the film industry and acts as a mechanism that re-forms the way that movies are made within the Islamic Republic.

Chapter Five

New Forms in Cinema and Media Post-Khatami Iran

In 2005 Khatami's second term came to an end, and the limit of two consecutive terms for the president in Iran precluded him from seeking reelection. The subsequent election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose hard-line conservative platform radically differed from Khatami's moderate policies, indicated the country's frustration with the Reformist Movement and its inability to liberalize the government during Khatami's eight-year presidency.¹ During the 2005 elections, Ahmadinejad positioned himself as a populist candidate, in contrast to his main rival Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khatami, both clerics and members of the ruling elite. With the support of Supreme Leader Khamenei, Ahmadinejad promised to address the country's economic problems, and especially its alarming unemployment rates, which helped him garner more than 60% of the vote.² Ultimately the 2005 elections marked the rise of the neoconservative movement in Iran and brought to a close the more moderate atmosphere that Khatami's presidency cultivated.³

¹ Michael Slackman, "Winner in Iran Calls for Unity; Reformists Reel," *The New York Times*, 26 June 2005.

² Eva Patricia Rakel, "The Political Elite in the Islamic Republic: From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 29, no.1, 121-123.

³ For more, see Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

Almost immediately, Ahmadinejad and his newly formed cabinet began altering cultural policies and adjusting their stance on film in particular. In 2005, the newly appointed Minister of Culture, Hossein Saffar-Harandi declared a ban on the distribution and exhibition of films that promoted “secularism” and “feminism.”⁴ There was an expectation that Ahmadinejad would tighten the government’s control of the film industry, and in 2006 conservative members of the *majles* criticized the president because they claimed that the films released during his first year were “not significantly different” from “Khatami era” films and did not meet the “higher values of the Islamic regime.”⁵ This criticism brings to focus two important features of Iranian cinema after Khatami’s presidency. First, the new president’s conservative atmosphere generated new contestations about the film industry and new attempts to refashion it. Second, the reformist aesthetic project that began and developed during Khatami’s presidency remained relevant during Ahmadinejad’s first term.

While most of this study is devoted to demonstrating that cinema and the Reformist Movement intersected at various points in Mohammad Khatami’s political career, this chapter argues that these intersections created a reformist aesthetic that continues to develop and transform even after the Reformist Movement, as a political entity determined by Khatami’s presidency, has ended. Cinema has continued to seek the relevance of Khatami’s popular discourse, and specifically it has attempted to evaluate

⁴ Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic* (London: Routledge, 2010), 53.

⁵ Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema*, 53.

these terms of his political platform after the failure of the Reformist Movement to create the changes that this terminology promised. These films were released after Khatami's presidency and do not benefit practically from his political leadership but are nevertheless invested in a reformist aesthetic that might have otherwise been overlooked if one only considered the Reformist Movement's impact on cinema in terms of its ability to foster a culturally liberal political atmosphere.

This chapter examines Massoud Bakhshi's *Tehrān anār nadārad* [Tehran Has No More Pomegranates] (2007), an experimental documentary, and the music video “‘Eshq-e sor’at” [Love of Speed] (2007), performed by the underground band Kiosk, directed by Ahmad Kiarostami, and released on YouTube. I use this comparison to argue that reform as an aesthetic movement functions outside of the temporal limits of its political antecedent. Although both works were released two years after Khatami's presidency ended, and did not benefit directly from his cultural liberalism, they still participate in central reformist debates. Specifically, they interrogate the legacy of Khatami's political platform, which included concepts like “civil society” and “religious democracy.” Their experimentation with form further suggests that the reformist aesthetic possesses a momentum that permits it to develop and transform without explicit contact with the political movement that inspired it. By considering a film alongside a music video, I hope to use reform to connect innovations in cinema to trends in new media and youth culture and thereby establish a new model for the study of cultural productivity in contemporary Iran.

Filming Reform, Reforming Film

Tehran Has No More Pomegranates is a self-described “musical, historical, comedy, docu-drama, love story, experimental film,” and although relatively short (68 minutes), it manages to encompass all of the styles and genres to which it lays claim. The film is truly experimental and changes mediums, switches narratives, and makes disorienting jumps in space and time. *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* takes Eisenstein’s notion of cinematic montage to an extreme by forcing disparate images to collide across distant temporal and social boundaries. The film actively resists the informing logic that often determines the documentary genre, and for this reason Mohammad Sa’id Mohassesi questions whether the film can even be categorized as a documentary.⁶ Amir Puriya goes so far as to suggest that the film is *zed-e mostanad* or an anti-documentary because it so willingly defies the argument-based conventions of the genre.⁷

However, viewing the film through the lens of reform allows us to approach the question of categorization from a different vantage point. I argue that reform acts as one kind of an informing logic that guides the viewer’s experience with the film and his or her understanding of it. Reform functions as a point of entry into the narrative and it is a strand that can be traced throughout. *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*’ composite style posits a profound statement about the history and legacy of reform in Iran, and

⁶ Mohammad Sa’id Mohassesi, “Futbāl bā qavānin-e handbāl” [Soccer according to the rules of handball], *Film* 361 (2007), 109.

⁷ Mohassesi, “Futbāl bā qavānin-e handbāl,” 109.

because the film is also about the process of (documentary) filmmaking in the country, it theorizes reform as an aesthetic possibility.

Mohassesi sees *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* in the same tradition as Kamran Shirdel's *The Night It Rained*,⁸ and it is the functionality of these two films, rather than their particular contents, that links them together so cogently. As Chapter Three demonstrated, Shirdel's *The Night It Rained* establishes and plays with disconnect between the images we see and the sounds that we hear. This methodology encourages the viewer to challenge the formation of truth and to question truth as an epistemological category. Bakhshi's *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* similarly creates tension between sound on the one hand and image on the other. The film sets this tone within its first minute. The viewer is confronted with wild images of traffic of Tehran at night, and at the same time a voice reads from Zakariya Qazvini's thirteenth-century text *Āthār al-bilād wa-akhbār al-'ibād* [Monuments of the Countries and the History of their Inhabitants]:⁹ "Tehran is a large village near the city of Rey, full of gardens and fruit trees. Its inhabitants live in anthill-like underground holes. The village's several districts are constantly at war..." This description of Tehran does not align with the images we see of a modern metropolis in motion.

⁸ Mohassesi, "Futbāl bā qavānin-e handbāl," 109.

⁹ For more, see, T. Lewicki "al-Ḳazwīnī, zakariyyā' b. muḥammad b. maḥmūd Abū Yaḥyā," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman , Th. Bianquis , C.E. Bosworth , E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2011. [Brill Online](http://www.brillonline.nl.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-4093).
<http://www.brillonline.nl.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-4093>

This moment early in the film, before the narrative has even officially begun, generates difference (through audio-visual collision) and the viewer must reconcile this difference by neglecting either the audio or the visual *or* by coming to some conclusion about why the difference exists. In both cases, the reliability of (the) film is brought into question, because the viewer is forced to contemplate how the film is constructing an “accurate” portrait of Tehran. *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* constantly requests that viewer engage with the text on this critical level. Five minutes into the film, after the viewer has already come to terms with its basic premise, a warning flashes on the screen: *shabāhat-e ādam-hā va havādes-e film bā namuneh-hā-ye vāqe’i dar besiyāri az mavāred ettefāqist* [similarities between the people and events of this film with (and?) *real* examples is, in many cases, coincidental].¹⁰

The tentativeness of this statement provides it with complexity. The facts of this film are not *entirely* untrue, but in many cases they are. This notion is repeated later in the film when “found footage” is overlaid with a narrative voice that reminds viewers, “Owing to problems in verifying facts, this film is probably full of mistakes.” Nosrat Karimi, who provides the voiceover in this section, repeats his warning twice, because he messes up the first time. The apprehension of both statements challenges the viewer to determine which people and events merely bear resemblance to the historical world and

¹⁰ It should be noted that in the English subtitles, this caution is translated as “All the characters and events in this film seemed to be real, but it’s not true.” While this translation conveys the basic meaning, it fails to capture the complexity of the original.

which people and events are grounded in the historical world. The resulting uncertainty ultimately makes it difficult to latch onto specific arguments within the documentary.

Nevertheless, reform is one theme that is established early in the film and featured throughout, and the narrative premise of the film plays a crucial role in signaling the importance of reform to the film. *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*' basic narrative structure takes the form of a production report, written as a letter from the director to the president of the Documentary Center (within the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance). Throughout the film, the Massoud Bakhshi's voice, as a narrative voice, describes in his letter the process of making the film, which, he claims, remains incomplete. At the beginning of the film/letter, Bakhshi identifies himself with details including his name, birthplace, marriage status, and employee number at the Documentary Center. He explains that he wrote the script for the film five years earlier. It took that amount of time to obtain the proper permits to begin production, and he shows the permit on screen, along with other official documents including his ID card and contract. However, Bakhshi notes that "Tehran is constantly in a state of reform," so the five-year-old script was no longer relevant to Tehran today. Accordingly, the director and his crew decided to produce a different film, one that compares an old "found" documentary with images of contemporary Tehran.

The director's description of the trajectory of *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* locates reform temporally, geographically, and structurally within the film's text and context. *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* premiered at the 25th Fajr Film Festival in

February 2007. The five-year window that the director mentions in his letter positions the film's origins well within Khatami's presidency. Additionally, the director's repeated mention of permits and the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance serves to intimate Khatami, who, during his tenure as Minister of Culture, played an important role in forming the institutions that oversee filmmaking in the Islamic Republic. The atmosphere of reform that gave rise to *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* is underscored by the director's suggestion that Tehran is in a constant state of *reform*.

This observation captures the presence of reformists in the capital city and also points to the cycles of construction and transformation that Tehran as a physical space is experiencing. Like Rakhshan Bani-E'temad's *Under the Skin of the City*, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* uses the city of Tehran to signal reform. Finally, the atmosphere of reform literally reshapes the Massoud Bakhshi's project and determines a new direction for the film. As a result, we see reform impacting the methods and aesthetics of filmmaking. The connections between *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* and reform, which Bakhshi introduces early in the film, are gradually developed and made more complicated as the film proceeds, and together they constitute a convoluted but cogent statement about the legacy of reform in the post-Khatami period.

Tehran Has No More Pomegranates' basic structure comprises two main components. First the director and his film crew compare images of contemporary Tehran to images of the city from an old "documentary" that they allegedly found in the archives of the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance. In the second section, the film crew

attempts to construct a “realistic” image of Tehran by focusing on the institutions that define it. Reform as a historical and political institution has important bearing in both sections. In the first part, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* evaluates the effectiveness of reform as a historical process and considers its late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century narratives. In the second section, the film questions how reform, an institution with its roots in Iran in the nineteenth century, plays out in contemporary Tehran, a sprawling mega-metropolis. The film’s methodology engenders a comparative and cross-historical perspective, and *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* ultimately guides the viewer to the conclusion that reform—as an alternative to revolution—is an ineffective instrument for the enactment of social and political change in Iran.

Tehran Has No More Pomegranates establishes reform as a category of inquiry when the voiceover in the “found” documentary declares that Naser al-Din Shah, upon returning to Iran from Europe, declared himself an *eslāhtalab* or reformist. Naser al-Din Shah, the Qajar ruler of Iran from 1848 to 1896, was the first king in Iran’s modern history to travel to Europe. He published his travel diaries and was responsible for initiating the process of westernization in the country. Naser al-Din was especially fascinated by western technology during his trips abroad, and he was the person who brought filmmaking technology to Iran, an exceedingly important point upon which I will expand later in this chapter. However, for now it is important to recognize that, according to *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*, nineteenth-century reform in Iran was tied to westernization. This point is emphasized in the film when it discusses Naser al-Din’s

attempts to reform the gardens of Iran by introducing new produce. This discussion is followed by sounds from the bazaar: *tut-e farangi* [strawberry, lit. European berry], *gوجه farangi* [tomato, lit. European plum], “*hamash farangiyeh!*” [all of it is European!]. Ultimately, the film questions the effectiveness of the changes that Naser al-Din Shah made by comparing them with similar phenomena in contemporary Tehran.

Although modern Iran has been in a constant state of transformation, undergone several waves of reform and experienced at least two revolutions, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* demonstrates that very little has changed between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. The film utilizes such points of comparison to introduce this argument to the viewer, and in the process emphasizes it through the use of humor, which ultimately strengthens rather than tempers the director’s critique of reform. The beginning of the “found” documentary introduces old Tehran as a place of “clay huts, grand gardens and narrow alleys,” and Tehranis of that time as “illiterate, stupid, and vulgar people.” In contrast, Bakhshi, the narrator of contemporary Tehran, claims that “by the grace of God, today we have wide highways and wise citizens.” However, the images that the film presents as evidence fail to support this argument.

We see a wide highway made narrow by an expansive traffic jam, and mention of “wise citizens” is punctuated with images from the *zurkhāneh*, an ancient form of athleticism that emphasizes physical prowess but does not conform to the narrative voice’s claim of wisdom. The carnivalesque music and the slow motion that accompany the images of the *zurkhāneh* make a mockery of the athlete’s movements, which are not

seemingly the pursuit of a wise individual. This scene abruptly cuts to a wide-angle shot of a supermarket that emphasizes the narrow aisles, a contemporary rendering of the narrow alley. This scene, in contrast to the preceding, is in fast-motion, which emphasizes the narrowness of the alleys that people are quickly navigating. All of these images (the highway, the *zurkhāneh*, and the grocery store) combined are on screen for less than a minute. Nevertheless, their impact is profound and stays with the viewer as these exact images are repeated throughout the film again and again. Although these shots are very contemporary – they are colorful, industrial, and in-motion – they ultimately signal the absence of reform rather than reform itself. The images demonstrate that while the technology has changed, the basic conditions have remained the same. Certainly, these examples are extreme and exaggerated, but the film functions in a polarized domain and sometimes reverts to polemics.

Tehran Has No More Pomegranates introduces twentieth- and twenty-first century reform efforts counter-intuitively through the figure of Amir Kabir, a nineteenth-century reformist appointed as Prime Minister by Naser al-Din Shah in 1848. Like all of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century figures, Amir Kabir is introduced through the “found” documentary, whose voiceover declares, “The Shah appointed the reformist Amir Kabir as prime minister. He opposed court bribery and corruption. He condemned all kinds of crimes: stabbing and lewdness.” Amir Kabir, often considered Iran’s first reformist, attempted to modernize and westernize the country while working within the existing monarchical framework. The mention of the reformist efforts of Amir Kabir in the

“found” documentary encourages Massoud Bakhshi to locate reforms in contemporary Tehran. He says, “I discovered that reforms are still widespread in Tehran. Today the state reforms trees, grass, parks, and male facial hair.” This statement, though humorous, functions as a biting critique. *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* suggests that “today’s state” is only interested in reforming the surface of the city, and certainly these surface changes do not meet the standards of systematic reform (e.g. rule of law, civil society, and religious democracy) that Mohammad Khatami promised.

The film’s references to Amir Kabir and to the surfaces of Tehran draw the Reformist Movement of Khatami’s presidency into a much broader conversation of reform in Iran. In particular, they reference Khatami’s predecessor Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who served as president between 1989 and 1997 during what is popularly known as the “Period of Construction.” During this time, the country attempted to recover from the devastating losses of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, and many of these reconstruction efforts visibly took place on Tehran’s surface. In the early 1990s, Tehran underwent a renewal under the city’s mayor at the time, Qolamhossein Karbaschi.¹¹ Many of Hashemi Rafsanjani’s efforts focused on the privatization of the economy in Iran. However, Hashemi Rafsanjani’s platform was “economically liberal” but “philosophically” traditional,¹² and he also attempted to control bodily surfaces, including facial hair and women’s dress. Nevertheless, Hashemi Rafsanjani imagined his policies

¹¹ Fariba Abdelkhah, *Being Modern in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 27.

¹² Daniel Brumber, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 153.

as reforms, and he remains a proponent of Amir Kabir and his reformist efforts. Hashemi-Rafsanjani wrote a biography of Amir Kabir called *Amir Kabir yā qehremān-e mobārezeh bā este'mār* [Amir Kabir or the Hero of the Battle with Imperialism]. By drawing on the elements of Hashemi Rafsanjani's political career, Bakhshi positions Khatami's reformist efforts as a continuation of the previous presidency. In doing so, he creates the same sense of untimeliness that haunts Rakhshan Bani-E'temad's *Our Times...*

Tehran Has No More Pomegranates cuts from the brief critique of Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani back to the "found" documentary and the voiceover notes, "But Amir's reforms didn't satisfy the corrupted court so they killed him." At this moment, the documentary film breaks and the viewer sees the magnetic film meaninglessly spinning and hears the startling sound of the film's flapping. This transition offers a startling conclusion to the representation of nineteenth-century reform, Amir Kabir and his efforts. It underscores the fate (i.e. the death) of reform in the nineteenth century. By juxtaposing nineteenth-century reform with (the absence of) contemporary reform efforts, Massoud Bakhshi establishes reform as a cyclical process in Iranian history. His film, although a more or less complete history of modern Iran, mentions but does not develop a discussion of any of the revolutions that radically altered the country's political systems. For example, the "found" documentary that forms the basis of the film's first section ends as the Revolution of 1978-1979 is happening. Instead, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* emphasizes reform as the system of change around which Iran's modern history *revolves*.

The film's juxtaposition of two of the cycles of reform encourages the viewer to speculate on the progress of current reform and its potential fate. The film's representation of the lack of progress of nineteenth-century reform and its ultimate collapse suggests reform as an unsustainable and ineffective means of enacting change.

The film's critique of progress, especially within the context of reform, continues into the twentieth century. The documentary voice notes rise of Reza Khan, his overthrow of Qajar Dynasty in 1925, and subsequently the establishment of the Pahlavi regime. This narrative is accompanied by shots of the Pahlavi military rigidly marching. Reza Khan had been a military leader, and the images in *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* remind viewers of the military nature of his regime. The shots of the Pahlavi military are laced with images of the Qajar military in procession, which the viewer has already seen.

By placing these chronologically disparate images next to one another, the film encourages the viewer to note the similarities between them. While the technology of the Pahlavi military is more advanced, the basic structure of the two military processions is strikingly similar. In the Iranian context, nineteenth-century reforms are aligned with westernization, and in the twentieth century westernization means modernization. A direct trajectory developed alongside the advent of western technology. However, with scenes like this one, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* questions the impact that technology had on Iran in terms of creating structural change.

The discussion of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century reform allows us to understand better *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*' alternative title. During the opening sequence, the film first introduces itself as طهران/تهران or *Teheran/Tehran* and moments later offers تهران انار ندارد or *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* as its title. Although the director ultimately favors the latter, the former is in some ways more provocative. It captures the tension between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries and it acts as a metaphor for reform both during and between these periods. The alternative title طهران/تهران plays with the spelling of the capital city. Although both spellings are pronounced exactly the same in Persian, the first spelling (طهران) is an older spelling that comes directly from Arabic. The newer spelling (تهران) started gaining more acceptance during the late nineteenth century, during roughly the same period as the Qajar reforms.¹³

The film posits the orthographical change as analogous with the reforms of both the nineteenth and the twentieth/twenty-first centuries: just the surface form is changing, not the meaning or pronunciation. This change on the surface brings to mind *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*' critique of contemporary reform, which takes place on trees, grass, and facial hair. The futility of these surface reforms is expanded later in the film, when Bakhshi describes contemporary Tehran as the "age of *false* construction," in contrast to the era of mass construction that followed increased oil revenues in the 1960s and 1970s. This statement is followed by images of half-completed building and bulldozers meaninglessly pushing around dirt. These shots recall similar images in both

¹³ Nevertheless, it is important to note that the old spelling was still in use throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and as late as the 1950s the old spelling of Tehran was featured on license plates.

Bani-E'temad's *Under the Skin of the City* and Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*, and once again we see that the reformist aesthetic is invested in the city of Tehran as a dynamic space that accommodates and represents the sense of futility against which the Reformist Movement initially reacted and to which it would ultimately fall powerless.

After the “found” documentary ends as the Revolution of 1978-1979 is unfolding, the film crew of *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* decides to shoot a “realistic” image of contemporary Tehran. However, establishing a vantage point for this realistic picture of Tehran proves challenging, because, as the Bakhshi notes, “Tehran has thousands of extraordinary subjects, each worthy of an entire film!” After careful observation, the film crew determines that the law and a trend the film identifies as the motorcycle phenomenon (*padideh-ye motorsiklet*) are the two most important institutions in Tehran today. The former is particularly relevant to the discussion of reform in the film. Viewers, especially at the time of *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*' release in 2007, would immediately recognize this reference to the law as a gesture towards Mohammad Khatami's promise to follow the “rule of law” in Iran. Bakhshi claims, “Tehran is much more law and democracy abiding than ever before,” but his stress on the word “*besiyār*” [much] adds a hint of sarcasm to his claim. The instability of Bakhshi's statement is compounded by the accompanying song, the lyrics of which claim, “Here, everything is shaking, trembling, shaking.” At this point in the film, the soundtrack (the narrative voice and music) undermines the effectiveness of Khatami's promise to bring democracy and the rule of law to Iran.

The film further pokes fun at these concepts as it continues to document the filmmaking process. The cameraman suggests that the crew capture the Tehran cityscape, and Bakshi says, “I, as a respecer of democracy, had to accept this idea.” The cameraman’s request is followed by “the young photographer,” who uses “democracy as a pretext” to ask to shoot portraits of Tehran’s citizens, and once again the director has to acquiesce. The images that follow both of these requests—presumably the products that the cameraman and photographer generate—capture the paradoxes of contemporary Tehran. Shots of wild traffic in Tehran appear alongside scenes from the *zurkhāneh*, and an old man uses a stick and mallet to gin cotton as a bright yellow train passes behind him. All of these images point to the tension between modern and traditional forces in Iranian society. Within the film’s context, the role of democracy in producing these images positions it on the spectrum between modernity and tradition that the images themselves create. In doing so, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* questions the place of democracy in this polarized system. How does democracy, as Khatami conceived of it, reconcile these competing forces? Is it even able? *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* merely alludes to these questions. However, as I demonstrate in the next section, Kiosk’s music video “Eshq-e sor’at” [Speed of Love] makes a strong statement in this regard.

Tehran Has No More Pomegranates more directly challenges Mohammad Khatami’s Reformist Movement by critiquing the terms that he introduced into popular discourse in Iran. Specifically, the film suggests that Khatami’s abstractions, like “civil society,” are out of touch with the very concrete problems that plague Tehran. In this

sense, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* applies a methodology that is similar to Rakhshan Bani-E'temad's in *Under the Skin of the City*. In both films, the city of Tehran offers local socio-political, economic, and geographic problems that the Reformist Movement is unable to accommodate. While Bani-E'temad's film is interested in Tehran's north-south divide and the economic problems it engenders, Bakhshi's film expresses concern for the city's density problem and for the earthquake that experts have predicted will devastate Tehran at some point in the near future. As I demonstrate, in both cases, Bakhshi examines these physical problems within the context of Khatami's terminology. In doing so, he applies the basic mechanisms of the montage theory that determines the film's visuality in order to encourage the viewer to question the expansive reach of Khatami's proposed reforms.

In their evaluation of Tehran, Massoud Bakhshi and his film crew conclude that in recent years the city's most pressing issue, "alongside of civil society, democracy, and these kinds of things" is the problem of density. The film defines density as "the space that one occupies in Tehran!" and they determine that the distribution of space is different for every citizen in the city. To illustrate this fact, the film returns to an earlier example that compares a citizen from North Tehran to a citizen from South Tehran. Babak *jān* is a London-born construction manager, who lives with his wife in a 600-square-meter apartment in North Tehran. According to the film's calculations, Babak and his wife each have 300 square-meters. In contrast, *Āqā* Ja'far, a Kurdish employee at a brick factory, lives in South Tehran with his wife and two children in a 25-square-meter apartment, so

accordingly each member in his family has a density of five square-meters. This example suggests that the disparities in the distribution of space are geographically determined, and this conclusion is supported by Bakhshi's claim that certain "truths about south and north Tehran" are revealed "just by changing the location of the camera." The accompanying shots demonstrate the differences in density that distinguish Tehran's cityscape and are determined by the city's north-south divide.

Bakhshi slyly includes his analysis of Tehran's density problem within the context of Khatami's Reformist Movement. He configures the uneven distribution of space alongside of Khatami's terminology (civil society and democracy), and the initial formulation seems to give credence to the abstract ideas of the Reformist Movement. However, Bakhshi lends urgency to the issue of density by developing it within the context of the film and providing it with visual evidence and materiality. Civil society and democracy, in contrast, are rendered visually inaccessible to the viewer throughout the film and remain distant from the physical and spatial problems (i.e. density) that *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* develops. Bakhshi further trivializes the reformist terminology by following "civil society" and "democracy" with "*va in harf'hā*" [and such words]. This dismissive term locates Khatami's political agenda the realm of abstraction; it consists of words that exist separately from action. By placing the notion of density alongside civil society and democracy, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* forces the viewer to reflect on the impact (or lack thereof) that the Reformist Movement had on the physicality of the city.

When Massoud Bakhshi announces that civil society and democracy are among Tehran's most pressing concerns, it is with a sense of irony, because much of the film is structured around the social and economic disparities that are, for many Tehranis, much more urgent. One of the film's most persistent characters is a man named Ja'far *khān*, a recent immigrant to Tehran, who replies " *nārāzi*" [unsatisfied] during all of the film's polls about the city's current state. Towards the end of the film, the crew decides to ask him why he is dissatisfied with everything. The interview takes place in front of a trashcan, upon which the motto "*shahr-e mā, khāneh-ye mā*" [our city, our home] has ironically been stenciled. In one of the film's most lucid moments, Ja'far *khān* explains:

I have been in Tehran for three months. I have seen what happens in the parks and on the streets. I have seen the poor. They are without money and homeless. The homeless are forced to sleep in parks. They have nowhere else to go. But the policemen attack them and beat them, which they don't even do to dogs. These are human beings...Everyone is human. Yes, we are hungry and homeless, but we are humans.

As he makes this plea to humanity, the film switches to scenes from a Qajar-era film that plays first forward and then backwards. Ja'far *khān*'s speech, coupled with the Qajar images (forward and reverse), suggests that some of the urban problems that plague Tehran are historically grounded, and have been overlooked and unattended by successive regimes and political movements, including the Reformist Movement.

The film's final critique of reform is similarly related to Tehran's physical problems; however, in this case, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* examines the

geological (rather than socio-economic) structures of the city. Bakhshi claims that his crew “peered under the surface of the city” and discovered a “menace...a horrible threat.” According to the film, experts predict that an earthquake will devastate Tehran in the near future, and 65% of Tehran’s buildings will be destroyed. The film casts this predicted earthquake into a historical cycle, likening it to the earthquakes that devastated the cities Rudbar in 1990¹⁴ and Bam in 2003. The film’s commentary on the cyclical nature of Iran’s history continues as it speculates on the condition of Tehran following the earthquake, citing “past mistakes” as the reason for the expansiveness of the earthquakes’ destruction. *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* predicts that Tehran will be reduced to shambles, but the vocabulary it uses to describe this state recalls exactly the thirteenth-century quotation by Qazvini about Tehran at that time. According to the film, post-earthquake Tehran will return to its origins. This idea is framed by the film’s final shot, which shows the discovery of a tiny pomegranate—the kind of pomegranate that Tehran no longer has—outside of the city.

Tehran Has No More Pomegranates ties the predicted earthquake to the Reformist Movement when it concludes that “after the earthquake democracy, reformist movements (*jonbesh-e eslāhāt*), and civil society will no longer exist.” The still images that follow this statement depict the aftermath of the Bam earthquake in 2003, and they powerfully capture the human suffering caused by natural disaster.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the earthquake in Rudbar inspired Kiarostami’s film *Zendegi va digar hich* [Life and Nothing More] (1992). Kiarostami goes in search of the actors who played in *Khāneh-ye dust kojāst?* [Where is Friend’s House?] (1989). The film mimics reality and shows a director and his son, who return to the village where one of his films was set, and examine the earthquake’s devastation.

In the context of such suffering, terms like “democracy” and “civil society” and concepts like “reform” appear sterile and powerless. The film’s observation that there will not be a place for the Reformist Movement after the earthquake epitomizes the film’s humoristic style. Obviously, amid such destruction, philosophical promises do not carry the same urgency, and the film’s mention of these reformist ideals seems just as out of place as the concepts themselves in a post-apocalyptic Tehran. The poor placement of the Reformist Movement in this world strikes the viewer as amusing, but at the same time it forces one to consider the inability of the Reformist Movement to address the foundational (and even geological) issues that teem under Tehran’s surface. The earthquake significantly ends the film’s history of Tehran at the same time that it ends the critique of the Reformist Movement. Just as the film begins with reform so too does it end with reform, and this fact is crucial to establishing reform as an informing logic within *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*’ structure.

At the same time that the film concerns itself with the history and legacy of political reform, it also bears in mind the reforms and transformations that are born from the relationship between certain films and the Reformist Movement. Indeed, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* is a meta-documentary, a documentary about documentary filmmaking. The director Massoud Bakhshi narrates the film as production notes for an incomplete film, and in the process creates the film that we are watching. *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* constantly refers to its own creativity and its technological processes. Throughout the film, the viewer is confronted with shots of the crew

organizing its equipment and in the act of filming. Bakhshi employs the same method of juxtaposing contradicting sounds and images in order to draw attention, often ironically, to the film crew's presence on screen. For example, in one scene, we hear a sound bite of the modernist poet Forugh Farrokhzad reading a very famous line of her poetry: "va in manam/zani tanhā/ dar āstāneh-ye fasl-e sard..." [And this is I/a lonely woman/ at the threshold of a cold season]. As these lines play, we see a woman alone, peering out of a window. However, the bright sun has cast a shadow on the wall below her window, creating a perfect silhouette of the film crew. The lines of poetry that Farrokhzad reads indicate to the viewer that the woman is alone, but the shadows on the wall playfully disrupt that possibility.

In addition to representing the bodies of the members of the film crew, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* often shows the technology that it uses, and in particular it alludes to 35mm film. There are countless images of film being loaded, film being repaired, film playing, and film in canisters. All of these references serve as reminders that *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* is in fact a *film*, created and preserved in celluloid. *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* also readily identifies itself as a film that is composed, in part, by other films. Massoud Bakhshi's composite film is achieved through the inclusion of a "documentary" that the film crew allegedly finds in the archives of the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance. Bakhshi's use of this kind of archival material positions the film within the global tradition of "found footage", an avant-garde trend that initially gained momentum in the 1960s.

Although the found documentary in Bakhshi's film is overlaid with a narrative voice that lends it authority, authenticity, and continuity, the informed viewer quickly identifies the images that establish the documentary as visual traces of Iran's cinematic history. The film features scenes from Mirza Ebrahim Akkasbashi Sani al-Saltaneh's early camera work with the Qajar court (1900), Ardeshir Irani and Abdolhossein Sepanta's *Dokhtar-e Lor* [Lor Girl] (1932), Ahmad Faruqi Qajar's *Tehrān-e emruz* [Iran Today] (1962), Kamran Shirdel's *Tehrān pāytakht-e Iran ast* [Tehran is the Capital of Iran] (1966), Bahram Bayzai's *Kalāgh* [Crow] (1976), and others. Moreover, the voice that provides narrative to the documentary belongs to Nosrat Karimi, a famous actor and filmmaker, whose role as Aqa Jun on the popular 1976 television show *Dāyi jān Nāpol'on* [My Uncle Napoleon] makes sound of his voice immediately recognizable. Therefore, as quickly as the film creates the illusion of a coherent "found documentary," it also destabilizes the unity of the components that make up the embedded text. William C. Wees, an early theorist of found footage, observes that whether films that use archival images "preserve the footage in its original form or present it in new and different ways, they invite us to recognize it *as* found footage, *as* recycled images."¹⁵

Wees categorizes trends in found footage as constitutive of "collage," a practice separate from mere appropriation. Collage, the use of montage in the context of found footage, "probes, highlights, contrasts;" whereas, "appropriation accepts, levels,

¹⁵ William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993), 11.

homogenizes.”¹⁶ *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* seems initially to approximate the latter by assembling the disparate archival images and sounds under the auspices of a single documentary, thereby creating a sense of leveling or homogenization. However, by splicing the “found” documentary with contemporary shots of Tehran, the film ultimately achieves Wees’s notion of collage. This technique, creating filmic unity and then tearing it apart, demonstrates how celluloid film is constantly being reformed and reshaped within *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*. Significantly, Bakhshi shows the process of film being cut and manipulated on screen, which serves as a reminder that film can be formed and reformed, and old images can thereby be preserved and at the same time generate new meanings in different contexts.

The particular sounds and images that Bakhshi preserves in his film are especially important because they establish a trajectory within which the director positions his own film. The two scenes that Bakhshi repeats most often in *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* come from Mirza Ebrahim Akkasbashi Sani al-Saltaneh’s early camera work with the Qajar court (1900) and Ardeshir Irani and Abdolhossein Sepana’s *Dokhtar-e Lor* [The Lor Girl] (1932). These two films represent two of the most important moments in Iran’s early cinematic history. The grainy moving images shot by Akkasbashi depict Mozzafar al-Din Shah’s visit to Belgium in 1900, and scholars generally agree that they are the first moving images shot by an Iranian. Akkasbashi, whose name references the fact that he was a photographer for the Qajar court, was

¹⁶ Wees, *Recycled Images*, 46-47.

responsible for bringing film technology to Iran, with the support and encouragement of Mozzafar al-Din Shah, the son of Naser al-Din Shah. Mozzafar al-Din Shah shared his father's interest in technology and reform. Negar Mottahedeh argues that these images, which were taken during a flower ceremony, emphasize the exchange of glances between the Iranian men of the Qajar court and European women. Iranian cinema has since its inception been grounded in the tension between engendered gazes.¹⁷ While Mottahedeh overstates the gendered aspects of the gaze, the geographic part of her argument is useful, and Akkasbashi's images reinforce the idea that late Qajar reform efforts were grounded in western technology.

The second film to which *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* devotes significant screen time is the 1932 film *The Lor Girl*. This film is significant as the first talkie film in Iranian cinema. As such, it marked the first time that audiences could relate to the characters on a linguistic level and hear them speak Persian.¹⁸ *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* makes ready use of *The Lor Girl*'s sound capabilities. Multiple times during his film, Bakhshi plays a sound bite of *The Lor Girl*'s main female character Golnar screaming "Ja'far," laying it over a diverse set of images from contemporary Tehran.

¹⁷ Negar Mottahedeh, "Iranian Cinema in the Twentieth Century: A Sensory History," *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 4 (September 2009), 529-531.

¹⁸ Interestingly, Iranian cinema's first venture into filmmaking with dialogue proved challenging. *The Lor Girl* was produced and filmed in India, and producers Ardeshir Irania and Abdolhossein Sepanta had to rely on Iranians living in India to serve as actors. However, the exile community in India was largely composed of Iranians from the province of Kerman, including the actress Roohangiz Saminejad. Because Saminejad had a thick Kerman accent, Sepanta had to adjust his script, and he made Golnar's character originally from Kerman. It is also worth noting that *The Lor Girl* was the first Iranian film, and one of the first films in the Middle East, to cast a woman in a main role.

The film's politicized content was also an innovation at the time. *The Lor Girl* tells the story of Ja'far, a young bureaucrat who is sent to Lorestan, a particularly unyielding province at the time. He falls in love with a tea house attendant named Golnar, who is being captive held by a band of thieves. Ja'far defeats the bandits, and he and Golnar escape to India, fleeing the chaos of Iran. They eventually return to Tehran when they hear about Reza Shah's efforts to modernize the country. Hamid Reza Sadr argues that *The Lor Girl*, through its plot, location, and characters, encompasses many of Reza Shah's reforms. For example, Ja'far's challenges in Lorestan parallel those of Reza Shah, whose first course of action was to centralize power and break up the tribal system that governed much of Iran. Similarly, Sadr views Golnar's arrival to the city as an echo of Reza Shah's "attempt to bring modernity through secularization, industrialization, and the nuclearization of the family."¹⁹

By referencing Akkasbashi's early moving images and *The Lor Girl*, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* positions itself within a tradition of innovation. At the same time, the film makes an important observation about the relationship between socio-political reform and cinematic reform. The advent of Iranian cinema and the invention of talkie technology in the Iranian context occurred alongside two of the most significant reform efforts of the early twentieth century. While scholars like Hamid Naficy have argued that revolution, and specifically of the Revolution of 1978-79, have radically

¹⁹ Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (New York: I.B. Tarius, 2006), 27-28.

altered the course of Iranian cinema,²⁰ ultimately reform, a more subtle discourse, has encouraged some of the most profound changes in Iranian cinema. *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* focuses on reform throughout and reconfigures the history of Iranian cinema to favor a reformist orientation.

The film envisions itself as part of this relationship between cinematic and political reform movements. It focuses on the history of political reform at the same time that it plays with possibilities that come with restructuring actual film. Indeed, critic Mohammad Sa'id Mohassesi indicates his surprise that in this digital age, well after Kiarostami's *10* establishes digital video as viable experimental form, 35 mm film remains the Bakhshi's medium of choice.²¹ However, with *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*, Massoud Bakhshi offers an alternative to the digital push, and he revives old-fashioned celluloid film as young and experimental. Specifically, by combining archival footage with new footage, the film creates new contexts and as a result generates new meanings. He literally re-forms old films, a process that we see on screen. This methodology accords with Mohammad Khatami's Reformist Movement, which similarly sought to re-contextualize (i.e. within the Islamic Republic) the historical cycles of reform that began in the nineteenth century.

²⁰ See, for example, Hamid Naficy "Iranian Cinema Under the Islamic Republic," in *Images of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts of the Middle East*, ed. Sherifa Zuhur (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998) and Hamid Naficy, "'Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update'" *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

²¹ Mohessesi, "Futbāl bā qavānin-e handbāl," 109.

One of the major contributions of *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* to documentary filmmaking in Iran is its far-reaching appeal. It was the first documentary to be shown widely in theaters since the Revolution of 1978-1979, and it fared well at the box office.²² This fact demonstrates how the film also attempts to reshape limits of the genre. It opens up possibilities that filmmakers like Rakhshan Bani-E'temad never saw. While Bani-E'temad attempts overcome the limited reach of documentary films by bringing elements of documentary filmmaking to narrative film, Massoud Bakhshi physically reshapes the conventions of the genre by juxtaposing a sundry set of contemporary and archival images and laying them alongside an equally diverse soundtrack. The effect of this methodology is an aesthetic that is as humorous as it is critical, and one that actively resists the informing logics that normally determine documentary filmmaking. The success of *Tehran Has No More Pomegranate* in 2007 ultimately speaks to the momentum that the reformist aesthetic possessed even after Khatami's presidency ended. The relationship between cinema and the Reformist Movement continued to evolve even after the benefits of Khatami's liberal cultural policies no longer existed for Iranian filmmakers.

²² Jaber Tavazo'i, "Ja'far va Golnar dar Tehran-e bi-anār: goftogu bā Massoud Bakhshi," [Ja'far and Golnar in Tehran without Pomegranates: A Conversation with Massoud Bakshi], *Jām-e jam* 9 Tir 1388/25 June 2009, 7.

“Demokrāsi-ye Dini, Pitzā-ye Qormeh Sabzi”

The historical-political context that *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* examines and the methodologies it creates and expands have developed coevally with certain innovations in the application of new media within the Iranian cultural sphere. Specifically, the music video “‘Eshq-e sor’at” [Love of Speed], performed by the underground band Kiosk, directed by Ahmad Kiarostami, and released on YouTube in 2007, shares in the film’s aesthetic concerns and its critique of Mohammad Khatami’s Reformist Movement. While *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* self-reflexively draws attention to the tangible canisters of celluloid film that preserve its images, “Love of Speed” is a digital video whose images and sounds formlessly wander almost infinite Internet space, tagged and shared on various social networking sites and available to nearly everyone. Despite these differences in form and access, a very real, if not unexpected, relationship exists between the two texts, and elements of the reformist aesthetic that I have described throughout this study inextricably bind them together. By closely examining the music video for “Love of Speed,” one can more precisely delineate the nature of this relationship. In turn, it is possible to argue that reform as an aesthetic movement continues to evolve even as Khatami’s presidency has ended. Further, this relationship between philosophical film and the products of youth culture establishes reform, rather than revolution, as a new model for the analysis of cultural productivity in the Islamic Republic over the last twenty years.

Recent efforts in cultural studies have attempted to validate and develop a vocabulary for the analysis of music videos, which serve as complex cultural products that draw on musical, poetic, performative, and cinematic traditions, and thereby provocatively cross the disciplinary boundaries that so often determine our scholarship. In their book *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, Diane Railton and Paul Watson attempt to recover music videos from the commonly held view that they are meaningless by-products of capitalism or, even worse, irrelevant.²³ Instead, Railton and Watson offer a view in which music videos are deeply political, often subversive, contribute to our understanding of race, class, gender and sexuality, and even capable of resisting the capitalist modes of production that create them. Moreover, the authors incisively note that music videos bring to focus the fact that screens are no longer the sole domain of cinema.²⁴ In this age of hyper-technology, most individuals have multiple screens (television, phones, mp3 players, iPads, etc.) that they use countless times each day. Music videos since their inception have demarcated the democratization of screens through venues like MTV, and they continue this trend with the Internet as the primary means through which music videos are distributed to our various screens.²⁵

While Railton and Watson's study open up music videos as a medium worthy of serious scholarship, the framework they develop is limited in its scope. The authors draw

²³ Diane Railton and Paul Watson, *Music and the Politics of Representation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 1.

²⁴ Railton and Watson, *Music and the Politics of Representation*, 7.

²⁵ For more on the evolution of the relationship between music videos and the various screens that they occupy, see Roger Bebee and Jason Middleton, eds., *Medium Cool: Music Videos from Soundies to Cell Phones* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

almost exclusively on the American music video tradition, and the critical questions that they ask about race, class, and gender privilege American and western European values and conceptions. Railton and Watson also position their study vis-à-vis capitalism; they are reacting against the idea that music videos are just by-products of capitalism and offer the possibility that music videos can resist capitalist models. They work under the assumption that music videos are tied to the music industry, and the transmission of music videos goes in tandem with the exchange of capital. Kiosk's "Love of Speed" allows for the expansion of Railton and Watson's framework by accounting for music videos that draw on non-western traditions and function as products in global transmission. At the same time, an analysis of "Love of Speed" enables preliminary theorization of those music videos that emerge from non-industrialized underground and repressed music scenes that are not tied to the same capitalist models that dominate the American popular music industry. Like the examples in Railton and Watson's study, Kiosk's video is deeply political, but the marriage of lyrical and visual elements in the video requires the contextualization of trends within Iran's modern cultural and intellectual history.

"Love of Speed" was the first single off of the Kiosk's second album by the same title, released in 2007, a year after the band members left Iran and settled in the United States and Canada. Kiosk formed underground in 2003 at a time when underground music scene Iran was reaching its height. However, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election in 2005 marked the end of Khatami's moderate era, and the band left the country a year

later to pursue their music with fewer restrictions, which in turn allowed them to pursue greater social and political critique in their music. The underground music scene in Iran, like the film industry, is very much tied to notions of reform and Khatami's reforms in particular. The policies that emerged after the Revolution of 1978-79 drastically restructured the music industry in Iran. Female singers were banned from performing in public, and all forms of music deemed "western" were similarly forbidden. These policies were based on statements by Ayatollah Khomeini but codified and implemented by Khatami's Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance during the Islamic Republic's first decade. However, just as with cinema, one can detect a significant transformation in Khatami's beliefs about music between his tenure as Minister of Culture and his presidency.

Indeed, the liberal cultural policies that emerged following his election in 1997 benefited music Iran as well. In 1998, the ban on western-style pop music was lifted,²⁶ and Laudan Nooshin argues that one can trace the origins of the current underground music scene in Iran to that moment when the ban was lifted.²⁷ She credits this change in policy with restructuring the way that Iranian society interacted with music; it marked a shift wherein Iranians were no longer just consumers of western pop music but also

²⁶ It should be noted that other western styles, including rock, alternative, and heavy metal, were still banned. However, the line that separates all of these different styles is fluid, thus determining the nature of "pop" has been left to the interpretive powers of various governmental agents.

²⁷ Laudan Nooshin, "Underground, Overground: Rock and Youth Discourses in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005), 469.

producers of their own pop music.²⁸ The possibility of legally producing western music significantly increased the number of bands in Iran. Nooshin also attributes the liberal cultural atmosphere that Khatami's presidency fostered and specifically discourses of civil society with the rise of active musicians in the country.²⁹ All of these factors have created "an unregulated grass-roots popular music movement," a new phenomenon in Iran, where traditionally popular music has been the domain of the government or foreign sources.³⁰

However, like filmmakers, musicians in Iran need permits (*mojavvez*) from the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance in order to distribute or perform their music in public. Although the new policies in 1998 meant that groups that performed certain kinds of western music could conceivably receive permits, the reality was that very few did, and that fact remains true today.³¹ Generally, the pop bands that have succeeded in obtaining permits from the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance perform songs that are almost indistinguishable *musically* from their counterparts in the Los Angeles-based Iranian expatriate pop music industry, but *lyrically* are deeply religious and draw on traditional Shi'i motifs and images. As a result, the underground music scene in Iran is necessary political, because bands perform musical acts of resistance every time they

²⁸ Nooshin, "Underground, Overground," 469.

²⁹ Nooshin, "Underground, Overground," 463.

³⁰ Laudan Nooshin, "The Language of Rock: Iranian Youth, Popular Music, and National Identity," *Media, Culture, and Society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State*, ed. Mehdi Samati (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 70.

³¹ For a fascinating look at the underground music scene, one which takes into consideration the distribution of permits and issues of form and style, see Bahman Ghobadi's underground film *Kasi az gorbeh 'hā-ye Irāni khabar nadārad* [No One Knows About Persian Cats] (2009).

produce in a public form music that is unsanctioned by the government, even if their songs have no social or political critique. At the same time, the current underground music scene and its many frustrations are tied to Khatami. As Nooshin notes, his election created momentum for the creation of a popular music industry in Iran, founded on the hope that Khatami's reforms would allow music that began underground to come to the surface. However, that possibility was never realized, and by 2007 when "Love for Speed" was released, the underground music scene in Iran had come to a head and had nowhere to go.

The music video "Love of Speed" powerfully captures both the personal frustrations of underground musicians and the disillusionment of Iranian society as a whole as it comes to terms with the end of both Khatami's presidency and moderate reform in the country. The music video, is especially well suited to representing the various levels of concern about the Reformist Movement's legacy after Khatami's presidency, because as a form the music video has to reconcile in some way the various layers (musical, lyrical, visual) that it comprises. In her groundbreaking study of the music video as a distinct genre, Carol Vernallis explains that music videos create a multitude of complex meanings by establishing give-and-take between sound and image. The complexity is compounded by modes of discontinuity that are necessitated by the genre's temporal limits.³² Music videos are relatively short, because at the time of their

³² Carol Vernallis, *Experience Music Video: Aesthetic and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), x.

inception they were in competition with one another for airtime on limited venues, like specialized television stations.³³

The interplay of sound and image and the genre's temporal limits profoundly affect the music video's ability to narrate. Vernallis identifies debates in the field about whether music videos function according to narrative, like some movies or television shows, or whether they act as "postmodern pastiche that actually gains energy from defying narrative conventions."³⁴ She uses this debate to expose the fact that attempts to examine music videos through the lenses of other forms and genres fail to capture the rich meanings that emerge from the collision of the various elements that form the basis of a music video. Instead, Vernallis argues that videos take shape according to the song's form, which favors "episodic" or "cyclical" rather sequential direction.³⁵ Further, music videos follow the concerns of pop music and implement a "consideration of a topic rather than an enactment of it."³⁶ This model proves useful to an analysis of Kiosk's music video "Love of Speed," because the video generates a cohesive critique of the Reformist Movement, and this critique defies the conventions of narrative, but not in a self-reflexive postmodern way. Instead, the video's lyrics and images generate a system of contradictions and playful suspense that positions Khatami's Reformist Movement in the

³³ Currently, competition for music videos is no longer based on limited airtime. Although in the age of YouTube, storage and access to music videos is almost unlimited, the genre still adheres for the most part to its original conventions. Moreover, the hyper-nature Internet puts music videos in a different kind of competition, wherein they are rivaling against other videos and sites for user attention.

³⁴ Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 3.

³⁵ Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 3.

³⁶ Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 3.

context of a larger set of contradictions that define urban life in Iran. In this way, Kiosk's music video operates in a manner similar to Massoud Bakhshi's *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*, which also seeks to position reform as just another urban problem.

On the level of both lyric and image, the music video "Love of Speed" begins by establishing Iran, and Tehran specifically, as a site of paradox, a place where contradictions live in a functional—if not somewhat unsettling—harmony. The video's first few moments capture the unique tension between opposing forces in contemporary Tehran, at the same time that the opening scene demonstrates the profound connection between word and image in the video. The song's countdown, "seh, do, yek, boro" [three, two, one, go], coincides with a counter on a traffic light, and traffic, which is an important motif throughout the video, begins as the song begins. The framing of this opening scene depends on the traffic right coming from the right side of the frame and a mosque that fills the left side of the frame.

The video visually achieves balance by creating tension between the traditional and contemporary elements that determine the Tehran cityscape. While the mosque architecturally and religiously represents tradition, traffic is one of the quintessential markers of life in a contemporary metropolis and traffic lights operate as the mechanism that systemizes and regulates vehicular movement. The tradition-modernity theme is picked up and repeated as the video continues. We see shots of different kinds of city traffic, including busy streets, narrow alleys, and big highways. The video creates visual interest as it pans from undistinguished highway traffic (that could exist anywhere) to a

bright digital billboard advertising BMWs, before finally settling on a huge neon, hillside side that resembles the Hollywood sign but reads “yā Hossein.”³⁷ Once again, we see the juxtaposition of religion and tradition on the one hand and contemporary city life on the other.

The song’s first words, which begin after the instrumental introduction that ends with the “yā Hossein” sign, confirm the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity as an important concern in the song and video: “qodrat-e ‘eshq o ‘eshq-e qodrat/ modernitiyeh yā sonnat” [the power of love and the love of power/modernity or tradition]. The arrival of the sung word also introduces the video’s unique way of performing its lyrics.

Throughout the music video, the lyrics are lip-synced by people on the streets of Tehran, rather than the band Kiosk.³⁸ Lip-syncing is a standard, though not uniform, convention in the music video genre, which, in its most basic form, seeks to create (or underscore) a relationship between word and image. It is also a means through which the performer visualizes the production of voice and claims authorship of the work. However, Kiosk subverts this convention and plays off of viewer expectation, and in turn the band heightens the relationship between word and image. We are *more* aware of the image,

³⁷ This Arabic phrase is invoked by Shi’i Muslims to refer to Hossein, the martyr at the Battle of Karbala in 680, and it is used especially during the celebration of Moharram. It also has a political history and has been used during resistance movements in Iran and India. Interestingly, in Iran supporters of Mir-Hossein Mousavi used “yā Hossein” as slogan after the results of the 2009 elections were announced.

³⁸ Although the act of random people on the streets of Tehran performing the song’s lyrics has a subversive role in the video’s aesthetic (as I shall demonstrate), the decision was also likely practical. When the song and the video were released, the members of Kiosk were already living in exile because of their music. Returning to Iran to perform the song may not have been possible for them.

because the body does not match the voice; we sense the disconnection between the voice we hear and the person we see.

The video's lip-syncing technique, drawing on the relationship between the lyrics and the people on the streets of Tehran, positions the person who performs the lyrics as somehow representative of the lyrics being performed. However, like the montage in *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*, the mismatched lip-syncing in "Love of Speed" forces the viewer to determine the nature of the relationship between two disjointed layers. The delivery of the song's first lyrics, mentioned above, establishes this system with a particularly rich juxtaposition. The words "qodrat-e 'eshq o 'eshq-e qodrat/modernitiyeh yā sonnat" [the power of love and the love of power/modernity or tradition] are performed by a cleric who is standing on the street with a huge work of graffiti behind him. Immediately the viewer is struck by the fact that this man is not Arash Sobhani, the lead singer of Kiosk, and something other than voice connects the word and image. The lyrical structure takes "the power of love" and inverts into the "love of power," The fact that in Iran religious institutions hold a great deal of power is emphasized by the presence of a cleric on screen, and the lyrics ("the love of power") call into question the motivation and legitimacy of the Islamic Republic.

The opening couplet's second line propels the discussion of power into a temporal dimension by asking "modernity or tradition?" The cleric's performance on screen suggests, perhaps somewhat ironically, that tradition and modernity exist side-by-side in the Islamic Republic. The cleric represents a traditional force in Iranian society, but in the

video he is singing along to an underground rock song, and standing next to graffiti. Nevertheless, there is uneasiness in his performance, which makes it especially jarring and introduces the idea that perhaps tradition and modernity cannot comfortably exist in Iranian society—an idea that is repeated in the song's refrain and its critique of the Reformist Movement.

Throughout the music video, just as in the first performance, the interplay between word and image is playful and humorous at the same time that it is critical. For example, at one point in the video, Kiosk claims, “doktor-e qalb nemikhāim, jarāh-e fak o bini” [we don't want cardiologist, just facelifts and nose jobs]. This lyric pokes fun of the fact that Iran is a world capital for cosmetic surgery, and nose jobs are especially common among young, upper-class Iranian women.³⁹ The two women who perform these lyrics epitomize the kind of Tehrani woman who puts a lot of effort into her appearance. This moment in the video is representative of the humor that runs throughout the work, but also contains a serious critique. The lyric implies that Iranian society favors surface transformations (plastic surgery) rather than address the heart of the problem (cardiology). This preference is inscribed onto the bodies of women, both within the video and on the actual streets of Tehran.⁴⁰

³⁹ For more on the cosmetic surgery phenomenon in Iranian society, see Mehrdad Oskouei's film *Demāgh, beh sabk-e Irāni* [Nose Iranian Style] (2006). The film's title plays off of the title of Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini's famous documentary *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998).

⁴⁰ It is significant that over the last thirty years, different governments within the Islamic Republic have marked their political atmosphere by readjusting women's clothing. Moderate leaders allow women more freedom with their dress, and *hejāb* in particular, while conservative leaders have announced their conservativeness by cracking down on women's dress.

The lip-syncing methodology created in “Love of Speed” establishes a relationship between word and image that ultimately enables the video’s critique of the Reformist Movement. Carol Vernallis argues that lip-syncing participates in a “history of articulations” that every music video contains.⁴¹ Most professionally produced music videos feature a vast number of articulation points. First, for the song’s production, singers and musicians lay separate vocal and instrumental tracks; sound engineers mix and add new layers; and producers and editors cut and reorganize. As the music video is filmed, the song is played on set and performers react to it and add new interpretations, then the video footage is edited and reorganized before the song is laid on top of the images.

The most important point in this history for “Love of Speed” is the moment at which performers react to and interpret the song’s lyrics while on the set of the music video. Because the song’s lyrics are performed by everyday people rather than the band members, we witness a wide range reactions and interpretations that do not necessarily belong to the band. This feature of the video is most apparent during the song’s refrain: “demukrāsi-ye dini, pitzā-ye qormeh sabzi” [religious democracy, qormeh sabzi pizza].⁴² Several times in the video, the performers break into laughter when they say this line.

⁴¹ Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 55.

⁴² Qormeh sabzi is a traditional Iranian stew. Both in terms of taste and execution, it would be very difficult to create a qormeh sabzi pizza. Nevertheless, several months after the “Love of Speed” music video premiered, there were reports that an Iranian team won third place at an international pizza competition with a ghormeh sabzi pizza. However, I was unable to find confirmation of this victory in non-Iranian sources. It is also worth noting that even the phrase “pitzā-ye ghormeh sabzi” is contradictory, because the word “pitzā” [pizza] is a loan word and it is being combined with the name of a very traditional dish. The

The performers' react to the idea of a pitzā-ye qormeh sabzi [qormeh sabzi pizza], which combines a traditional Iranian dish and pizza, and the inability of the non-professional actors to maintain a straight face marks the incongruity of these two dishes. The ridiculousness of qormeh sabzi pizza punctuates and accentuates the incongruity of the couplet's first line: "demokrāsi-ye dini" [religious democracy], a more serious concept being evaluated by the song's refrain. The song's lyrical structure recalls the structure of certain genres in the classical Persian poetic tradition, in which the two mesra's that form a bayt, or couplet, generate unity. In "Love of Speed," there is an equational or analogous relationship between the two terms of the couplet. In the case of the song's refrain, the coupling of religious democracy and qormeh sabzi pizza renders the former just as implausible (and undesirable) as the latter. With four words, Kiosk destabilizes the notion upon which the Reformist Movement was premised. Khatami's efforts sought to create a religious democracy and introduce democratic ideals into the Islamic Republic's governance. His promise was that Islamic democracy could be created in Iran and that it would be the country's ultimate solution. However, "Love of Speed" casts doubt on that possibility by making a joke of it, and bringing it down to the same level as a ridiculous food combination.

"Love of Speed" was released two years after Khatami's presidency ended, and its critique of the Reformist Movement's most basic premise benefits from hindsight that allows it to evaluate the effectiveness of Khatami's efforts. In between the lip-syncing

Islamic Republic has attempted to eliminate Western loanwords and encourages the word "kesh loqmeh" [stretchy snack] for pizza.

performances, the music video for “Love of Speed” features shots from the streets of Tehran. Many of these images establish the contradictions that determine contemporary life in Tehran. For example, we see a group of women in *chādors* entering a mosque, a huge billboard for Dolce and Gabbana, a verse of Nezami’s poetry, posters of Jack Nicholson and Marlon Brando and a car with an ornate Fatimah sticker in its rear window parked next to a car with the popular “Peeing Calvin” decal on its bumper.

However, another category of images depict Tehran as a troubled and problematic city. There are shots of dilapidated buildings, street violence, poverty, and pollution. Because the criticism of “religious democracy” is repeated several times – it is in fact the only lyric repeated in the song – “Love of Speed” situates the Reformist Movement in the context of Tehran’s contradictions and problems. Like *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad’s films, “Love of Speed” positions Tehran as a space where the lack of reform is especially visible.

Conclusion

The video’s last scene is especially powerful and, at twenty seconds, significantly longer than any other shot. It shows a man spraying a pile of wet trash with a hose, kicking it, stomping on it, doing anything he can to get it to go down a wired drain in the street. Because the scene stays on screen for an uncomfortable amount of time, especially after the video has trained the viewer to become accustomed to rapid visual changes, the futility of his actions becomes especially apparent. The length of the scene also gives rise

to questions about the practicality of the man's efforts. Might it be easier to pick up the small pile and throw it away? Or is a pile of trash really supposed to go down a street drain? This scene is particularly interesting because an almost identical scene exists in Massoud Bakhshi's *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*. In both instances, this act functions as a metaphor for what the Reformist Movement was able to achieve. The final evaluation posited by the film and the music video two years after Khatami's presidency is that very little was achieved, and nothing that could not have been accomplished through other means, despite the energy and resources that were expended. As "Love of Speed" and *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* demonstrate, Post-Khatami Iran has been marked by the same sense of futility and hopelessness that afflicted the intellectual classes in the early and mid-1990s.

As the final scene in the music video "Love of Speed" demonstrates, the city of Tehran acts as a dynamic space that conforms to the contours of the successes and failures of the Reformist Movement, and the metaphorical and transformational powers of Tehran represent one of the definitive features of the reformist aesthetic, especially in those works created during and after Khatami's election in 1997. However, the "Love of Speed" music video furthers our understanding of the relationship between visual media and Tehran, because it makes evident the ways in which urban locality can be transmitted globally. Although the music video is grounded in the actual streets of Tehran and intervenes in the national, sociopolitical concerns of post-Khatami Iranian society, it is also very much a transnational product.

The video was filmed in Iran by a Los Angeles-based, Iranian-born videographer, and local Iranians perform a song released by an Iranian band, whose members currently live in the United States and Canada. Most importantly, the music video was released and continues to be transmitted and accessed on the internet. In her study of the role of the internet in the development of Iranian national identity among individuals in exile, Janet Alexanian argues that new media has allowed the Iranian nation “to be imagined as a transnational entity.”⁴³ The “Love of Speed” music video proves that the reformist aesthetic has entered this transnational public sphere, and it is a fitting place for the artistic responses to the Reformist Movement, because Khatami sought to free Iran from its global isolation and to initiate global dialogue. The video “Love for Speed” on YouTube creates a critical but also a complicated and visually exciting picture of contemporary life in Iran that is open and accessible to the world.

⁴³ Janet Alexanian, “Poetry and Polemics: Iranian Literary Expression in the Digital Age,” *Multi-Ethnic Literature in the United States*, 33, no. 2, 146.

Chapter Six

Reform at Its Limits

While most of this study considers a narrow definition of reform, specifically the interpretations of Mohammad Khatami and his supporters, as a means of concluding, I would like to examine reform more broadly, not necessarily as historical process but rather as an epistemological category that has profoundly impacted how Iranian history is constructed and imagined. At the risk of simplifying a complicated narrative, Iran's modern history has been defined by cycles of reform and revolution, revolution and reform. These two concepts have dominated the modes of discourse in the country's intellectual history for over a century, and they have existed in constant tension with one another. The discussions of reform at the end of the nineteenth century ultimately gave rise to the Constitutional Revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century, just as the Revolution of 1978-79 gave rise to the reform efforts of Khatami at the turn of the twenty-first century. Although many of the changes in Iranian society over the last century have been born of the balance between these two opposing entities, our conception of Iran's modern history most often takes shape around revolution as the point of focus. However, this dissertation encourages the re-conceptualization of Iran's history and considers the discussions of reform that have occurred alongside revolution as playing a crucial role in the transformations that Iran has witnessed over the last century.

For over thirty years, a significant portion of scholarship in Iranian studies has been driven by the urgency to understand the causes and the effects of the Revolution of 1978-79. Certainly, those works that focus on the Islamic Republic take the Revolution as their starting point, as the single event that radically restructured governance and profoundly affected other aspects of Iranian society. However, the more interesting trend involves scholarship that examines much earlier periods (e.g. the nineteenth century) but was published after the Revolution. Many of these monographs position their arguments in terms of the Revolution, indicating that some aspect of Iran's pre-Revolution history might help us better understand why such a radical event took place.¹ The connections that these works draw between their arguments and the Revolution are often loose and perhaps function as a way of introducing a complicated part of the world to a more general reading audience by referencing a well-known event. Nevertheless, the effect of this scholarly trend is the same; recent Iranian historiography privileges the Revolution as the single most important event in the country's long history. In the process, it shapes an understanding of Iranian history that overlooks or downplays more subtle transformations like reform.

¹ See, for example, Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), Hamid Dabash, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation: 1804-1946* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2003).

The primacy of the Revolution of 1978-79 has been a particularly prevalent trend in the study of Iranian cinema. Film scholars have especially taken seriously Khomeini's statement about the powerful potential of cinema for educational purposes. This statement took place during Khomeini's first speech after his return to Iran in 1979 as the Revolution was unfolding and taking shape. As a result, scholars have understood an inextricable connection between the Revolution and the development of cinema during subsequent years. Khomeini's identification of cinema as an educational tool immediately imbued it with new politicized potential, and many scholars of Iranian cinema from the last thirty years attempt to understand the effect that the Revolution has had on the film aesthetic and the film industry.² These efforts often consider the impact of new cultural policies implemented immediately following the Revolution or attempt to evaluate the effect of the political charge with which the Revolution imbued Iranian cinema. Both trends, which continue to define the limits of inquiry for much cinema scholarship in the past decade, fail to adequately account for the emergence of reform in the 1990s as an alternative to revolution, one that has equally shaped the course of Iranian cinema.³

² See, for example, Shahla Mirbaskhyar, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution* (London: McFarland, 2006), Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), Hamid Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update," *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 26-61, Khatereh Sheibani, *The Poetics of Iranian Cinema: Aesthetics, Modernity and Film After the Revolution* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2011), Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic* (London: Routledge, 2010)

³ There have also been very noble attempts to demonstrate continuity between filmmaking before and after the Revolution of 1978-79. See, for example, Hamid Dabashi, *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2007). However, by downplaying revolution and the role of

Unlike revolution, which is generally understood as radically and immediately restructuring political and social systems within a given society, reform is best conceptualized as a gradual process that plays out over time and develops according to a particular trajectory. The films analyzed throughout this study demonstrate how reform, and especially Khatami's Reformist Movement, sheds light on how certain works within Iranian cinema operate aesthetically and philosophically. However, it is worth considering how the reverse is also true; the history of cinema described in this study helps us to trace the contours of reform in the Islamic Republic and to understand better how it took shape and direction.

A Visual History of Reform

The process of reform, as captured in the films and videos I have analyzed, comprises four stages that begin with revolution itself. The Revolution of 1978-79 ushered in a new understanding of what film could achieve in society and the kind of values it could represent. Khomeini's belief in the educational power of cinema and his concern about its ability to corrupt society, and especially the youth, initiated a set of policies aimed at promoting indigenous filmmaking while at the same time limiting the kinds of topics that could be treated cinematically and controlling the manner in which

politics in general, one also misses subsequent reform efforts, so this trend in scholarship has also overlooked the crucial role that reform played in the development of Iranian cinema in recent years.

permissible issues were represented on-screen.⁴ Revolutionary figures like Mohammad Khatami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf showed their commitment to the Revolution at this time by participating respectively in the creation and enactment of these policies. However, the emerging traces of reform could be discerned following the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 and the death of Khomeini in 1989. Makhmalbaf's *Time for Love* (1991) and Khatami's support of the film indicate the shift away from commitment to the rigid policies born of the Revolution and speak to the early signs of discontent during this period.

Certain films released at this time, like Makhmalbaf's *Time for Love* and Dariush Mehrjui's *Hamun* (1989), allow us to understand better how intellectuals and artists developed strategies to deal with their discontent during this phase in the process of reform. These strategies, which are only the early signs of reform in the Islamic Republic, are relevant to the more developed discourses of reform that emerge at the end of the decade because they remain committed to Islamic governance and attempt to function alongside the possibility of an Islamic republic. The intellectual and artistic strategies for the reconceptualization of the possibilities of the Islamic Republic primarily involved notions of relativism and the revival of mysticism. Makhmalbaf's *Time for Love*

⁴ Hamid Naficy (2002) identifies two stages in the transformation of Iranian cinema between the 1979 and 1989. First between 1979-1982, Iranian cinema witnessed a purification process that sought to correct the "corruptive" practices in Pahlavi-era cinema. This process included the burning of Pahlavi theaters, control over films imported into the country (usually to include only films that resisted imperialism, like *The Battle of Algiers*), and editing pre-Revolution films to conform to "Islamic values." The second stage, which initiated the Islamicization of Iranian cinema," included the creation of governmental structures to oversee, codify and enforce a body of policies that conformed to Khomeini's vision of what cinema should and could do. For more, see Hamid Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update," 26-61.

advocates for moral and cultural relativity, confounding the Islamic Republic's singular interpretation of Islam and calling into question one's ability to access religious, moral, and cultural truth. The film's message speaks to Khatami's own call for relativity in his defense of Makhmalbaf's work, as he created the space for future reforms by suggesting that Khomeini's policies were extreme measures necessitated by revolutionary context but did not constitute a unilateral and unchanging body of work. These conceptions of relativism and the nature of truth fit into a larger discussion of mysticism that was being articulated and rediscovered during the same period, the late 1980s and early 1990s. Mehrjui's *Hamun* powerfully depicts the intellectual turn to mysticism as a mechanism for dissent. The intellectual appeal to mysticism that is captured cinematically in Mehrjui's film is historically documented in this period in the philosophies of Abdolkarim Soroush, a prominent reformist philosopher, who drew from the mystic tradition and especially its critique of truth to articulate an expansive and complicated plea for pluralism.

The third stage in the process of reform, which coincides with Khatami's presidency between 1997 and 2005, recognizes the intellectual efforts of the early 1990s, and the films from the turn of the twenty-first century advocate a recasting of intellectualism in Iran, a movement epitomized in *The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine* by Mohammad Khatami, whose broad intellectual appeal stretched between western philosophical traditions and Islamic theology. Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* captures the urgency of breaking free of the intellectual stagnation of the early

and mid-1990s, and Kiarostami also performed the fundamentals of reform in this film, as he attempted to produce a challenging and provocative film while working within the limits of the film industry in Iran. Khatami's candidacy for president in 1997 marked a crucial turning point in the third phase, because it indicated the transference of reform as an intellectual movement to a more popular forum. Khatami's political platform demanded the articulation of abstract ideas as concrete concepts, and in doing so Khatami reconfigured the terms of popular discourse in Iranian society, introducing terms like "democracy," "civil society," "rule of law," and "dialogue among civilizations." The election of Khatami in 1997 and the political hope that his new discourse generated are central concerns of Rakhshan Bani-E'temad's *Under the Skin of the City* (2001).

However, Khatami's presidency and the availability of his political platform in public forums opened up the terms of reform to critique. At the same time that *Under the Skin of the City* demonstrates the powerful draw of Khatami as a public figure and his reforms as solutions to the country's troubles, it also interrogates the relevance of his global agenda by exposing local, urban problems. Bani-E'temad's evaluation of the reform is more fully explored in *Our Times...* (2002) as she depicts the 2001 elections and Iranian society's discontent with Khatami's progress during his first term. A similar critique of the Reformist Movement's inability to address the country's social problems, especially with regard to gender emerges in Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002). At the same time, these cinematic efforts participate in the very reforms they critique. The freedom with which Bani-E'temad represents and criticizes the political system is unprecedented in

Iranian cinema, and this phenomenon was undoubtedly the result of the liberal cultural atmosphere fostered by Khatami and concepts like “civil society.”

The final stage in the process of reform that emerges from the films examined in this dissertation involves the failure of organized political reform. The end of Khatami’s presidency and the election of Ahmadinejad marked the end of reform and the rise of neoconservatism in Iran. The inability of Khatami to create significant change through Islamic Republic’s existing structures (like *velāyat-e faqih*) suggested for many Iranians the failure of reform as a viable political solution in contemporary Iran. The responses of visual media, like Massoud Bakhshi’s *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* (2007) and Kiosk’s music video “Love of Speed” (2007), to Khatami’s presidency use the benefit of hindsight to bring the failure of the Reformist Movement into focus by using humor and new forms to criticize and trivialize its efforts. At the same time, Bakhshi’s film in particular encourages viewers to consider Khatami’s Reformist Movement alongside a tradition of reform in Iran’s modern history. The film’s dismissive evaluation of reform throughout Iran’s modern history centrally positions the inadequacy of reform within an Iranian context.

Pushed to the Green Limits

The history of reform that is visually constructed by the films and videos in this dissertation ends with the critique of the Reformist Movement in the post-Khatami period. Nevertheless, reform—as a concept in constant communication and tension with

revolution—continues to evolve and develop in Iran. The events following the Iranian elections in 2009, often referred to as *jonbesh-e sabz* or the Green Movement, encourage us to think about how reform as a political movement and as an aesthetic are pushed and expanded, and how they might very well give way to revolution. In June 2009 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sought reelections, and his strongest challenge came from reformist candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi. On June 13, 2009 the results of the election were announced and Ahmadinejad's term as president was renewed. Almost immediately, Iranians poured onto the streets in protest and claimed the results were fraudulent. Protests continued throughout the summer and were aggravated on June 29, 2009 when the Guardian Council certified the electoral results and again on August 5, 2009 when Ahmadinejad was sworn into his second term. The *basij*, a voluntary paramilitary organization under the supervision of the Supreme Leader and in this case pro-Ahmadinejad, attempted to quell the protests and often resorted to violence.⁵ The Green Movement has continued its efforts under the banner of The Green Path of Hope, and loose leadership is provided by Mousavi, Karroubi, Khatami, and other reformists.

One of the most striking and recognizable aspects of the recent Green Movement in Iran is the visual media response that has occurred alongside the protests, and the aesthetic shape of these efforts speak to the reformist aesthetic that developed in cinema under Khatami, in the same way that the Green Movement's politics are a continuation of Khatami's Reformist Movement. On a practical level, the elections of 2009 reinstated the

⁵ For a gripping chronological and analytical account of the Green Movement, see Hamid Dabashi, *The Green Movement in Iran* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 2011).

active involvement of filmmakers in the electoral process. Mohsen Makhmalbaf tirelessly supported Mousavi before and after his campaign, and following the announcement of Ahmadinejad's victory he used extensive connections with foreign media to denounce the results. Makhmalbaf also sent his youngest daughter Hana to make a documentary about the election.⁶ Similarly, the director Majid Majidi, well-known for his films about children, directed all of Mousavi's commercials during his campaigning efforts.⁷ Rakhshan Bani-E'temad continued the project she initiated in *Our Times*... and filmed a documentary about the elections called *Mā nimi az jam'iyat-e Irān hastim* [We are One Half of Iran's Population] (2009).

However, some of the most striking visual representations of the elections of 2009 and the subsequent Green Movement were generated by normal Iranians on the streets of Tehran, and it is these efforts that most powerfully speak to the reformist aesthetic that is the central concern of this study. The events following the elections were made visible across the globe through the use of digital video and social networking sites. Because of the proliferation of handheld devices in recent years, almost everyone has ready access to a video camera. Iranians made use of these devices to capture and record their protests in 2009, and the rest of the world was able to visualize the protests, and because of the point-of-view perspective that naturally occurs with this kind of handheld, in-the-middle-of-the-action video-making, people thousands of miles away were able in a sense to experience the protests as well. The most disturbing use of this technology was the video

⁶ Dabashi, *The Green Movement in Iran*, 56-57.

⁷ Dabashi, *The Green Movement in Iran*, 57.

of Neda Agha-Soltan being murdered during a protest. The video was shared on YouTube and Facebook and contributed to the making of Agha-Soltan as a kind of martyr figure for the cause.⁸

The Green Movement's use of technology and new media in this way was later appropriated and expanded during the revolutions across the Arab world in the spring of 2011. The similarities between these events allow us to reflect on the possibility that the reformist aesthetic, as a phenomenon in steady dialogue with revolution, has a place in a more transnational context as well. Because of the novelty of the Green Movement's widespread use of media and its broad appropriation the reformist aesthetic, one can position the Iran as the originary case. Nevertheless, the events of the Arab Spring 2011, and especially revolutions in places like Tunisia and Egypt, offers a glimpse into the possibilities of this aesthetic when the push for reform crosses into revolution.

Abbas Kiarostami advocates the use of digital video as a means of eliminating the role of the director in filmmaking by making his presence on set obsolete. However, the wide use of digital video during the Green Movement demonstrates how digital video might eliminate the role of the director through different means. When nearly everyone has the ability to make and distribute videos, the director, as filmmaker and *auteur*, no longer holds the same authority and the reformist aesthetic is no longer the sole ambit of professional filmmakers.

⁸ For more about the role that Neda Agha-Soltan's death played in the Green Movement's protests, see the PBS Frontline documentary *Neda Agha-Soltan: A Death in Tehran*, available online at <http://www.mohammadmossadegh.com/news/neda-gha-soltan/>.

The very acts of protest following the 2009 elections similarly evoked the reformist aesthetic, especially with regard to the role and representation of time and space. The Green Movement sought to constitute itself aurally as a revolution. Protestors revived and revised slogans from the Revolution of 1978-79 to once again call for revolution, and they played and sang songs popular during the previous revolution. Similarly, the spaces they constructed attempted to recreate the revolutionary experience, and protestors occupied many of the same physical locations as the protests that composed the Revolution of 1978-79. On a more a visual level, Green Movement activists created and revised political graffiti on the walls of Tehran, which began during the Revolution of 1978-79 as representative of a third world, anti-imperial struggle but which counter intuitively became state domain under the Islamic Republic. All of these efforts emphasized the significance of the physicality of Tehran but also attempted to *reset* time and created a general sense of the untimeliness of revolution.

The elections of 2009 and the Green Movement indicate that the reformist aesthetic is being taken to its limits, pushed to the extreme. It is being replicated and appropriated by thousands of individuals *en masse*. In his now classic, but still alarmingly relevant, article “You Say You Want a Revolution?: Hypertext and the Laws of Media,” Stuart Moulthrop considers what it would take to revolutionize an aesthetic that has developed gradually over time, and specifically he examines the potential threat of the so called “digital revolution” (and hypertext in particular) on literature. In his

discussion, he questions what will happen to hypertext—a new medium full of revolutionary potential—if taken to its limit.

Moulthrop draws on the ideas of media theorist Marshall McLuhan, and specifically the idea that “every form, pushed to the limit of its potential, reverses its characteristics,” to argue that even something as revolutionary as hypertext might implode and revert back to the old orders of control.⁹ Although Moulthrop’s discussion does not account for cycles of reform, his observations about aesthetics/literacy and revolution are, nevertheless, provocative. If we consider revolution and reform as binaries—deconstructed and intertwined but in opposition nonetheless—is it possible that reform in Iran, both aesthetic and political, might once again give in to the pulls of revolution?

⁹ Stuart Moulthrop, “You Say You Want a Revolution?: Hypertext and the Laws of Media,” *Postmodern Culture*, 1, no. 3 (May 1991).

Appendix

Khatami's Letter of Resignation from the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance

همن استعفا نامه حجت الاسلام والمسلمین دکتر خاتمی منتشر شد

سمه صدر مطلوب، لازم است که متصدیان امور بیش از همه کس نه تنها انتقاد که حتی بی انصافی‌ها، نامهربانیا و حتی نهمت‌هایی را که احیاناً به نام انتقاد متوجه آنان می‌شود، تحمل کنند و از این راه، شیوهی با همدیگر زیستن و خود را محور عالم و عقل کل ندانستن را به همه بیاموزند و آثار به جا مانده دیکتاتوری و استبداد چندین صدساله را که اساس آن با انقلاب اسلامی فرو ریخت، با نشان دادن سمه صدر در برابر دوستان کم حوصله و دشمنان منصف، اندک، اندک بزدایند تا انشاء الله زمینه‌ای فراهم آید که اندیشه جز با اندیشه برابرنهاده نشود و دلیل و برهان و منطق و انصاف میان اندیشه‌ها و آرا حاکم شود. اما متأسفانه در صحنه امور فرهنگی چندی است که به شیوه‌ای دیگر عمل شده است. یعنی چه بسا که با شکسته شدن همه مرزهای قانونی، شرعی، اخلاقی و عرفی، کار از نقد و ارزیابی، ولو غیرمنصفانه گذشته و هر وسیله‌ای برای رسیدن به اهداف خاصی مباح شمرده شده است و بدینسان می‌رود که کار به کلی از زوال منطقی و مشروع خارج شود و در نتیجه فضای ناسالم و آشفته پدید آید که فوری‌ترین اثر آن، دلزدگی و عدم امنیت اندیشمندان و هنرمندان سالم و صاحب شخصیت و حتی مومن و شیفته انقلاب و اسلام است.

اگر خدای ناخواسته در این هنگامه، مرز اصول و معیارهای بنیادین انقلاب و مصالح حتمی جامعه در هم شکسته شود و اگر قرار باشد در این آشفته بازار با مبانی پذیرفته شده نظام و از جمله آرا و فتاوی حضرت امام نیز تلویحاً و حتی تصریحاً مقابله و معارضه شود، هر چند که این نفی و شبهه انکاری از بی‌فهمی سیاسی‌های هنری شروع شود که پایه آن نظر و موضع محکم و مصرح امام است، مطمئن باشیم که در این صورت شاهد آغاز روند خطرناکی هستیم که امواج آن بسیاری از اصول و پایه‌های دیگر را نیز خواهد لرزاند.

من پیشتر گفتم که مخالفت با نظرات امام چه با حسن نیت چه با سوء نیت، از موسیقی آغاز می‌شود ولی به همین جا ختم نخواهد شد و خدا آن روز را نیاورد.

باری، مجموعه شرایط چنان بوده و هست که مرا در موقعیتی قرار می‌دهد که از ادامه خدمت در سمت فعلی عذرخواهی کنم و حضرتعالی مستحضری‌د که این موضع و نظر، مصاهبتی مقابله و معارضه شود، هر چند استناد نامه سابق الاشعر و مذاکرات بعدی، در آستانه انتخابات دوره چهارم مجلس، از جنبه‌های خواست‌مرا به بهانه مجلس، استعفا می‌را بپذیرد. اما این تقاضا مورد قبول جنبه‌های واقع نشود و ضمن اظهار محبت و حمایت از این وزارت، بر لزوم پایداری و ادامه راه تأکید فرمودید و من با اینکه چندانی امید به تغییر شرایط و اوضاع به نفع اندیشه و فرهنگ نداشتم، حرمت نظر شما را نگاه داشتم، اما دیدم و دیدم که موج ناسالم موجود به تلاش ناقص برای بهره‌گیری سوء و حتی عوام‌فریبانه از احساسات بخشی از نیروهای مومن در جهت هدف‌های ناسالم کشانده شد.

بنده صدمه کم تا به باری خداوند مراحل انتخابات دوره چهارم که بحمدالله با حضور خوب و باشکوه ملت سرافراز برگزار شد، به بیان برسد و اکنون فرصت تجدید تقاضای قبلی فرا رسیده است. حال که مسئولان بزرگوار که بیش از من باید مدافع کلیت نظام و اهداف والا و سیاستهای آن باشند، تهدیدهای اخیر را در ساخت اندیشه و فرهنگ جدی نگرفته یا به هر دلیل و ملاحظه‌ای در برابر آن سکوت کردند و همین امر سبب تخریب بیشتر کج اندیشی و بدخواهان شده است، بهتر است سکانداری امر فرهنگ و هنر و اطلاع‌رسانی در صحنه اجرا را نیز کسانی به عهده گیرند که شخصیت و باورشان با آنچه در این صحنه جاری است، ناسازگار نباشد یا دست کم راضی و قادر به انجام کار در شرایط فعلی باشند.

انتخاب ترجیح می‌دهم که بدون دغدغه مسئولیت اجرایی، با آزادی و اختیار درحوزه وظیفه دینی و انقلابی و انسانی خود را، در دفاع از اسلام و مصلحت نظام، طوری که آن را می‌شناسم و به آن باور دارم و نیز مقابله با جمود و تحجر و واپسگرایی که آن را بزرگترین آفت حکومت و نظام به قدرت رسیده دینی می‌دانم و ذهن مبارک امام (ره) را به خصوص در سالهای اخیر نسبت به این افتخار ایمان و زندگی سوز، شدیداً تکرار و بی‌تاب یافتم و همچنین دفاع از حقوق و آزادی‌های مشروع جامعه و افراد تا آنجا که توان و درک تأجیز من و امکانات اجازه دهد، در موقعیتی تازه و به صورتی دیگر انجام دهم.

در پایان با اذعان به اینکه همه ما نسبت به سرنوشت اسلام و ایران مسئول و به انقلاب بزرگ اسلامی مدیون هستیم و در هر کجا که باشیم و هر زمانی که متحمل شویم، در برابر اقیانوس موج خیز ایمان و همت ملت شریف و آزاد و مسلمان ایران و خون پاک شهیدان و فداکاری شگفت‌انگیز جانیان و آزادگان و مجاهدان راه خدا، قطره‌ای بیش نخواهد بود و با تشکر از همه همکاران گذشته و حال خود و نیز همه کسانی که در عرصه‌های گوناگون فرهنگی، هنری، مطبوعاتی و اطلاع‌رسانی صمیمانه و صبورانه بار سنگین مسئولیت را به دوش کشیدند و با اعتراف به اینکه نتایج مثبت فعالیتها، به حق موهبت رحمت و لطف الهی است و با پذیرش خاضعانه همه ضعفها و نارسائیا و نالروائیهائی که در صحنه بوده است، بدین وسیله استعفا بخود را از سمت وزارت فرهنگ و ارشاد اسلامی تقدیم می‌دارم.

سرلندی اسلام، عزت مسلمانان، عظمت جمهوری اسلامی و تأییدات رهبر معظم انقلاب عظیم‌القدر می‌کند و برای جنبه‌های هر موقعیت حساس کنونی در ادای وظیفه سنگینی که به عهده دارم، ایام عزت مستدام خردم ماه بیکهزار و سجد و هفتاد و یک سید محمد غامی

بیاضیه سپاه پاسداران انقلاب اسلامی به مناسبت روز نیروی انتظامی

سرویس خبری - سپاه پاسداران انقلاب اسلامی با صدور بیانیه‌ای ۲۷ تیر ماه روز نیروی انتظامی را تبریک و تعجیت گفت. در بخشی از این بیانیه آمده است: درود بر فرزندان پرورند و دلاور این مرز و بوم در نیروی انتظامی که از بدو پیروزی انقلاب شکره‌مند اسلامی و

تهران - خبرگزاری جمهوری اسلامی: متن استعفا دکتر محمد غامی که در تاریخ سوم خردادماه گذشته تسلیم حجت الاسلام والمسلمین آقای غامی و رفسنجانی، رئیس جمهوری اسلامی ایران شد، بدین شرح است: بسم الله الرحمن الرحیم حضرت حجت الاسلام والمسلمین آقای غامی رفسنجانی ریاست محترم جمهوری اسلامی ایران

با سلام و احترام پیوسته نامه شماره ۱۳۷۰/۱۰/۸۰ و مذاکرات مورخه ۱۳۷۰/۱۰/۱۵ اعتراض خدمت به انقلاب اسلامی و ملت شریف ایران در ساخت اندیشه و فرهنگ و وسائل ارتباط جمعی، نعمت بزرگی است که خداوند متعال نصیب این پند نامی خود که جز فضیلت دوستی، فضیلت ندارد، کرد. از این نعمت بزرگ، پروردگار را سپاس می‌گزارم، او که به خدایتانده مهربان است، از تقصیر و قصور غنمی‌آورم. عرصه فرهنگ و هنر و پایداری گری پر صده‌ای وسیع و پیچیده است که به پیچیدگی خود انسان که احوال کنونی عالم آن را پیچیده تر نیز کرده است و رسالت انقلاب ما که داعیه‌دار نجات انسان و پایه گذاری فرهنگ برتر است، در این عرصه از همه عرصه‌ها سنگین تر و سیر در این وادی از تمامی وادی‌ها خطرناکتر است.

من پیشتر گفته ام که مخالفت با نظرات امام چه با حسن نیت و چه با سوء نیت، از موسیقی آغاز می‌شود ولی به همین جا ختم نخواهد شد و خدا آن روز را نیاورد

پرواضح است که اگر نبود اندیشه و تدبیر پیشوای فقید امت اسلامی حضرت امام خمینی (قدس سره الشریف) و فتوای روشنگر آن عزیز، برداشتن گامی موفق نه برای من، که برای بزرگان نیز میسر نبود و امام با همه شجاعت و صلابتی که در دفاع از اسلام و جهاد با دشمنان حقیقت دین و حقوق و کرامت مردم داشتند، وقتی در باب ایجاد تحول در جامعه از جمله امور فرهنگی و فراهم آوردن فضای مناسب با نیازهای اساسی انسان روزگار ما و متناسب با مقتضیات زمان سخن می‌گویند و شکستن حصارهای جهل و خرافه را شرط رسیدن به و سرچشمه زلال اسلام ناب محمدی (ص) می‌دانند، با توجه به دشمنیهای نادرست و تأثیر آن در جامعه مومنان است که از لزوم قربانی شدن در این راه، دم می‌زنند و می‌خواهند تا دعا کنیم که آن وجود شریف نیز یکی از قربانیهای آن شود.

راهگشائیهای دوران امام آید که اصحاب با انصاف اندیشه و ادب و هنر و به خصوص مومنان فرهیخته را با شور و امید به عرصه تلاش و جهاد فرهنگی کشاند و چنان شد که در همه احوال و اطوار پس از انقلاب حتی در کوران جنگ تحمیلی، چهره فرهنگی جامعه انقلابی ما چهره‌ای برجسته و درخشان چه در داخل و چه در خارج بود. من ضمن تبریک عظمت آفرینی‌های فکری و فرهنگی به متفکران و هنرمندان و فرهیگان، به سهم خود صمیمانه از همه این عزیزان سپاسگزاری می‌کنم.

ایجاد ثبات در صحنه اندیشه و فرهنگ و تلاش برای حاکمیت قانون و زمینه‌سازی رشد نیروهای مومن و کارآمد در این عرصه، کارآسانی نبوده است، اما به لطف خداوند چنین واقعه مبارکی در حد قابل قبولی تحقق یافت تا اصحاب فکر و فرهنگ و هنر بتوانند در چارچوب ضوابط و قانون با امنیت خاطر که شرط مهم آفرینندگی است، تلاش کنند. مطمئن بوده و هستم که فراهم آوردن زمینه‌های رونق سالم فرهنگی شرط والا برین تواناییهای فکری جامعه و ایجاد مصونیت برای نسلی است که از هر سو در معرض طوفانهای مهیب الحاد و انحراف، تحجر و فساد است و طبیعی است که اهتمام به رونق فرهنگی لازم و تمیاتی دارد که فقط طاهر بیان تنگ حوصله حتی به قیمت تعطیلی اندیشه و نفی آزادیهای مشروع و قانونی که نتایج سهمگین و ویرانگری را به بار خواهد آورد، آن را بر نمی‌تابند.

فضاوت درست و همه‌جانبه در باب سیاستها، برنامه‌ها و فعالیتهای فرهنگی را به وجدان و آگاهی داوران منصف که بحمدالله فراوان هم هستند واگذار می‌کنم. اما یادآور می‌شوم که مقایسه میان آنچه پیش از این بوده است و آنچه امروز به آن رسیده ایم و لحاظ دشواریهای ذهنی و عینی و امکانات تأجیز در این زمینه شرط وصول به یک داوری درست است.

من و همکاران عزیزم، معتقدیم که تا رسیدن به هدف‌های والای انقلاب اسلامی و استقرار و استواری فرهنگ و هنر متناسب با خاان والای ملت آزاده راه درازی در پیش است که طی آن نیازمند تبیین درست اصول و ارزشهای اسلامی و ترویج مومنان به جدی گرفتن امر فرهنگ و هنر و برداشتن سدهای منفی ذهنی و خارجی از سر راه پرورش بهتر و بیشتر استعدادها و بالاخره همت بلند صاحبان اندیشه و رای است. اما مدعی هستم که با توجه به مشکلات و دشمنیها و کمیوندها، کاری که در این زمینه شده است، اگر بزرگتر از سایر زمینه‌ها نباشد، به هیچ وجه کوچکتر نیست و اگر ملاتی روا باشد، بیش از همه متوجه متفکران اسلامی و حوزه‌ها و محافل و مراکزی است که فلسفه وجود اجتماعی‌شان تبیین دین و نشان دادن حقانیت، اخلاص و کبرایای نظری و عملی اسلام و با وظیفه اصلی‌شان تولید و نشر آثار مختلف علمی، فرهنگی و هنری و دینی است و با بدو آن می‌توان انتظار تحول اساسی و دیرپا در فرهنگ و هنر جامعه داشت؟ و سوال اینکه بعد از انقلاب نیاز فکری و معنوی جامعه تا چه حد برآورده شده است؟

انتخاب گو اینکه مدعی هستم که به لحاظ همه شرایط نقص و عیب در صحنه فعالیت‌های فرهنگی و هنری کمتر از خیلی از صحنه‌هاست، به خصوص که تلاش پیچیده و پیگیر برای ضابطه‌مند کردن این عرصه روز به روز ما را به آینده بهتر و کم تشابه‌تر نزدیک‌تر کرده است. اما به هرحال انتقاد صاحب نظران از سیاستها و فعالیتهای که در حوزه مسئولیت من است و ارزیابی آن از سوی جامعه را از لطف بزرگ الهی می‌دانم و منتقدم که تا رسیدن به جامعه متعادل فکری و پیدایش

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Filmography

- *10* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2002, Iran/France/USA)
- *Apple / Sib* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 1998, Iran/France)
- *Blue Scarf, The / Rusari-ye ābi* (Rakhshan Bani-E'temad, 1993, Iran)
- *Boycott / Bāykot* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1985, Iran)
- *Bread and Alley / Nān va kucheḥ* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1970, Iran)
- *Brick and Mirror / Khesht va āyeneḥ* (Ebrahim Golestan, 1965, Iran)
- *Circle, The / Dāyereḥ* (Jafar Panahi, 2000, Iran/Switzerland/Italy)
- *Close-up / Nemā-ye nazdik* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1990, Iran)
- *Cow, The / Gāv* (Dariush Mehrjui, 1969, Iran)
- *Crow, The / Kalāgh* (Dariush Mehrjui, 1976, Iran)
- *Cyclist, The / Bāysikelrān* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1989, Iran)
- *Divorce Iranian Style* (Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 1998, Iran/UK)
- *Gilaneḥ / Gilāneḥ* (Rakhshan Bani-E'temad, 2004, Iran)
- *Hamun / Hāmun* (Dariush Mehrjui, 1990, Iran)
- *House is Black, The / Khāneḥ siāḥ ast* (Forugh Farrokhzad, 1962, Iran)
- *Legend of a Sigh / Afsāneḥ-ye āḥ* (Tamineh Milani, 1991, Iran)
- *Life and Nothing More / Zendegi va digar hich* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1991, Iran)

- *Lor Girl, The / Dokhtar-e Lor* (Ardeshir Irani, 1933, Iran/India)
- *Marriage of the Blessed / Arusi-ye khuban* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1989, Iran)
- *May Lady / Bānu-ye Ordibehesht* (Rakhshan Bani-E'temad, 1997, Iran)
- *Moment of Innocence / Nan va goldān* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1996, Iran/France)
- *Nasuh's Repentance / Tawbeh-ye Nasuh* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1983, Iran)
- *Narges* (Rakhshan Bani-E'temad, 1992, Iran)
- *Night it Rained, The / Un shab keh bārun umad* (Kamran Shirdel, 1967, Iran)
- *Nights of the Zayenderud / Shab'hā-ye zāyendeh rud* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1991, Iran)
- *No One Knows About Persian Cats / Kasi az gorbeh'hā-ye Irāni khabar nadārad* (Bahman Ghobadi, 2009, Iran)
- *Nose Iranian Style / Domāgh, beh sabk-e Irāni* (Mehrdad Oskouei, 2006, Iran/USA)
- *Off Limits / Khārej az mahdudeh* (Rakhshan Bani-E'temad, 1988, Iran)
- *Offside / Āfsāyd* (Jafar Panahi, 2006, Iran)
- *Our Times... / Ruzegār-e mā...* (Rakhshān Bani-E'temād, 2002, Iran)
- *Peddler, The / Dastforush* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1986, Iran)
- *Prince Ehtejab / Shāzdeh ehtejāb* (Bahman Farmanara, 1974, Iran)
- *Red / Qermez* (Ferydun Jeyrani, 1999, Iran)
- *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine / Bu-ye kāfur, atr-e yās* (Bahman Farmanara, 2000, Iran)

- *South of the City / Jonub-e shahr* (Farrokh Gaffari, 1958, Iran)
- *Tall Shadows of the Wind / Sāyeh'hā-ye boland-e bād* (Bahman Farmanara, 1978, Iran)
- *Taste of Cherry / Ta'm-e gilās* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1997, Iran/France)
- *Tehran is the Capital of Iran / Tehrān pāytakht-e Irān ast* (Kamran Shirdel, 1966, Iran)
- *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates / Tehrān anār nadārad* (Massoud Bakhshi, 2007, Iran)
- *This Is Not a Film / In film nist* (Mojtaba Mirtahmasb and Jafar Panahi, 2011, Iran)
- *Through the Olive Trees / Zir-e darakhtān-e zeytun* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1994, Iran/France)
- *Time for Love / Nawbat-e āsheqi* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1991, Iran/Turkey)
- *Two Sightless Eyes / Do cheshm-e bisu* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1983, Iran)
- *Under the Skin of the City / Zir-e pust-e shahr* (Rakhshan Bani-E'temad, 2001, Iran)
- *Where is the Friend's House / Khāneh-ye dust kojāst* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1987, Iran)
- *Who Do You Show These Films to? / Beh ki in film'hā ro neshun midin* (Rakhshan Bani-E'temad, 1993, Iran)
- *Wind Will Carry Us, The / Bād mā rā kh'āhad bord* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2001, Iran/France)